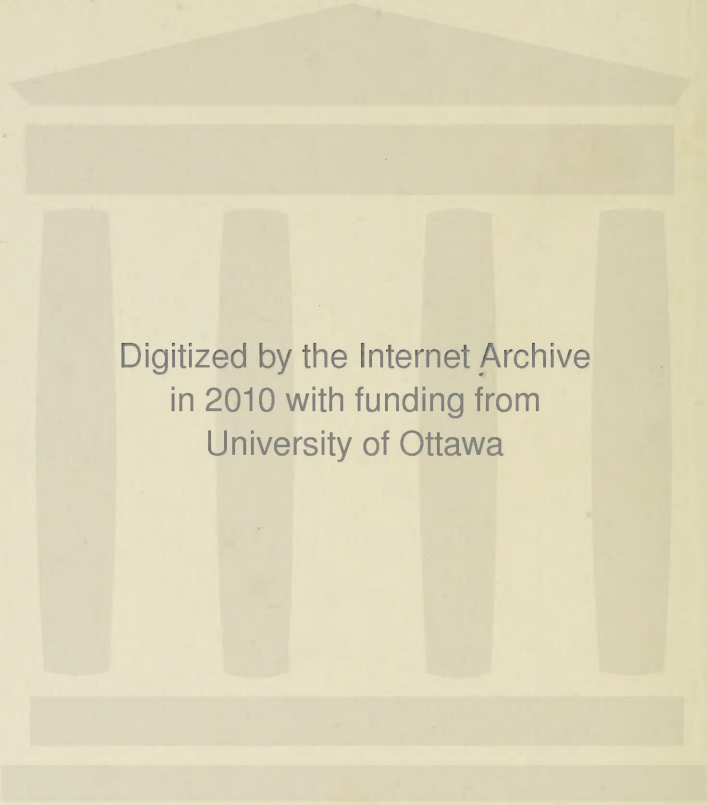


ROMANCES  
OF THE  
FRENCH THEATRE



FRANCIS GRIBBLE





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ROMANCES OF  
THE FRENCH THEATRE

*BIOGRAPHICAL WORKS BY  
FRANCIS GRIBBLE*

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MADAME DE STAËL AND HER LOVERS

GEORGE SAND AND HER LOVERS

ROUSSEAU AND THE WOMEN HE LOVED

CHATEAUBRIAND AND HIS COURT OF  
WOMEN

THE PASSIONS OF THE FRENCH  
ROMANTICS

THE LOVE AFFAIRS OF LORD BYRON

RACHEL: HER STAGE LIFE AND HER  
REAL LIFE

THE ROMANTIC LIFE OF SHELLEY

THE COMEDY OF CATHERINE THE  
GREAT







*Mademoiselle George*

# ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

BY

FRANCIS GRIBBLE

AUTHOR OF "GEORGE SAND AND HER LOVERS," ETC.

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1912



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## PREFACE

THIS book is not intended as—and is unlikely to be mistaken for—a philosophical disquisition on the æsthetics of the stage. Its purpose is chiefly to tell stories; but to tell them without suppressing the material facts necessary to a sound judgment of the rights of the case and a well-informed criticism of certain aspects of life.

It ought, of course, to be superfluous for a biographer to justify himself for telling the truth; but, as a matter of fact, biographers are continually getting into trouble with critics of a certain school of thought for doing so. They alone among men of letters are sometimes reproached for refusing to deceive their readers. Historians, for instance, are expected not only to tell the truth if they happen to know it, but also to take a great deal of trouble to ascertain it. They can burrow in archives with impunity, and in full confidence that they will be commended for their industry and not accused of grubbing up old scandals, or told that, when they make “unpleasant” discoveries, they ought to keep their knowledge to themselves.

The biographer's case is different. When he adopts the historian's methods of research, he is often denied the historian's immunity from reproach. If he

## PREFACE

presumes to make a candid use of the information which he has laboriously acquired, he is apt to be told that his candour is "unedifying," and to hear the clamorous cry : " This shocking biographer does not know his business. He has not suppressed the truth—he has actually told it."

That was, in effect, though not of course in actual words, the exclamation drawn from Cardinal Newman when James Anthony Froude told the truth in a contribution to a series of Lives of the Saints. That was also, in effect, Matthew Arnold's exclamation when Prof. Dowden told the truth, or as much of it as he could ascertain, about Shelley. More than one reviewer has, from time to time, raised similar objections to the present writer's essays in biographical veracity. It is not the sort of thing which it is worth while to get angry about ; but it may be worth while to review the objections philosophically and see what they amount to, and on what principles, if on any, they depend.

The first point to lay hold of is that they do not represent the settled policy of any particular paper. The same paper will often be found praising a biographer for telling the truth to-day, and calling him a mud-raker for telling exactly the same kind of truth to-morrow. The *Saturday Review*—to take the first instance which comes to hand—commended the present biographer with enthusiasm for telling the truth about Madame de Staël, but attacked him in offensive language for telling the truth about Chateaubriand. *The Observer*, in exactly the same way, rejoiced over the truth told in *The Passions of the French Romantics*, but deplored and denounced the truth told in *Rachel : Her Stage Life and her Real Life*. *The Scotsman*, again, welcomed the telling



## PREFACE

of the truth in *Rachel*, but raised objections to the course in the case of *The Love Affairs of Lord Byron*.

There is our first inconsistency. A second inconsistency may be brought to light by a comparison of the attitudes struck by the same critic on different, but similar, occasions.

An excellent example of this latter inconsistency may be taken from the criticisms of Mr. Andrew Lang, who, whatever attitude he takes at the given moment, never fails to take it with courtesy and support it with humour and scholarship. Mr. Lang wrote that he could "find it in his heart" to wish that the truth had not been told about Rachel. But when the truth was told about George Sand, Mr. Lang most kindly and genially assisted in its propagation by repeating and commenting upon the most entertaining of the contributory stories in a delightful *causerie* which appeared under his signature in the *Illustrated London News*.

The inference to be drawn from this sort of thing is tolerably clear. There exist certain floating phrases ready for the use of critics of this kind of literature; the phrases imply a theory; but the critics do not stop to think the theory out, and, if they did think it out, would, in the majority of cases, be more likely to reject than to adopt it. Let us try to get at the theory, in so far as it is deducible from the phrases used, and then, the ground thus cleared, let us inquire into its implications.

It does not seem to be the doctrine of the critic who employs the phrases that the biographer should not try to learn the truth about the subject of his biography. On the contrary, he generally represents that he knows it, and has always known it, himself. His claim is rather that the truth should

## PREFACE

be left at the bottom of the well in the depths of which he has himself inspected it, unless it happens to be "edifying." The whole controversy, in short, comes back to, and ranges round, the wonderful word "edifying."

Now the use of that word, in such a connection, either means nothing at all, or else it means this: that, in the view of those who so employ it, it is not "edifying" to know certain things about certain people unless you either know them incompletely or know them wrong. That is the *reductio ad absurdum* of the contention. Its absurdity leaps to the eyes when it is stated in that bald form. For, obviously, it is no more advantageous to know biography wrong than it is advantageous to know the multiplication table wrong. If one wants to know it at all, one wants to know it right. Just as the man who knows the multiplication table wrong makes mistakes in his calculations, so the man who knows biography wrong makes mistakes in his criticisms of life.

The conclusion is as applicable to the criticism of theatrical life as of any other manifestation of human activity. Perhaps it is even more applicable in view of the immense amount of complacent nonsense which is currently talked on the subject. There is a cant of broad-mindedness, just as there is a cant of Puritanism. Above all, there is a great conspiracy—in England, at all events—to ignore the effect of theatrical surroundings and experiences upon the human character. Whether that effect is good or bad, it should certainly be one of the functions of the theatrical biographer to detect and define it; and he can only do that by searching for the truth and telling it. *Suppressio veri, suggestio falsi!*

To say more than that—or to support the general-

## PREFACE

isation with particulars—would be to let the Preface trespass upon the province of the book, and to anticipate conclusions which it is more proper to leave readers to draw for themselves. So no more shall be said beyond an expression of the author's delight in discovering the sincerity of Marceline Desbordes-Valmore—a delicate flower of sentiment, as it were, flourishing in the midst of a rank wilderness of luxuriant affectations. She was poet as well as actress—a very great poet, in fact, and a very insignificant actress; and the soft charm of her singularly simple character belongs to her rather as a creative than as an interpretative artist. She was not one of those actresses who are proud of themselves as prizes for the possession of which the wealthy compete with the noble. She was an actress whose personal emotions were deeper and more genuine than those which she simulated on the stage: an actress whose heart knew its own bitterness.

Her story, which has only lately been fully told from unpublished documents by M. Jacques Boulenger, will be quite new to most English readers; and an equal degree of novelty can also be claimed for several of the other narratives contained in the volume. The materials for the Life of Mlle. Montansier have been lately brought together by the industry of M. L. Henri Lecomte. Fresh light has been thrown on the later years of Mlle. George by the researches of M. Hector Fleischmann. The chapters which show Talma engaged in a flirtation with Napoleon's sister depend upon papers recently discovered in the Bibliothèque Mazarin; while the story of Mlle. Clairon throwing herself, in her old age, on the protection of M. de Staël, and then pursuing him with the utmost rigour of the law because he failed to

## PREFACE

pay her the pension which he had promised her, is quite unknown to any of her biographers, and is based upon documents ferreted out, only a year or two ago, by M. d'Haussonville, in the Tower of the Archives at Coppet.

FRANCIS GRIBBLE.

*May 24, 1912.*



# CONTENTS

## CHAPTER I

|                                                                  | PAGE |
|------------------------------------------------------------------|------|
| The French Attitude towards the Romance of the Theatre . . . . . | 1    |

## CHAPTER II

|                                                                                                            |   |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---|
| The Rise of the Drama in France—The Story of Molière's unhappy Marriage—Racine and the Actresses . . . . . | 8 |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---|

## CHAPTER III

|                                                                                                |    |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Foundation, Constitution, and Tribulations of the Comédie Française—Mlle. Champmeslé . . . . . | 20 |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|

## CHAPTER IV

|                                                                                              |    |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| The Advent of Maurice de Saxe—Mlle. Gautier, the Comédienne who became a Carmelite . . . . . | 27 |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|

## CHAPTER V

|                                                                                                                                                                                 |    |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Adrienne Lecouvreur—Her Early Struggles in the Provinces—Jilted by the Comedian Clavel—And by her Protector Klinglin—Her <i>Début</i> in Paris—The Hearts at her Feet . . . . . | 38 |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|

## CHAPTER VI

|                                                                                                                               |    |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Adrienne Lecouvreur and Maurice de Saxe—His Infatuation and his Infidelity—Intervention of the Duchesse de Bouillon . . . . . | 52 |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|

# CONTENTS

## CHAPTER VII

|                                                                                                                                             | PAGE |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|
| Alleged Attempt of the Duchesse de Bouillon to<br>poison Adrienne Lecouvreur—Adrienne's Death—<br>Christian Burial refused to her . . . . . | 60   |

## CHAPTER VIII

|                                                                                                                                                                                                     |    |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Further Gallantries of Maurice de Saxe—His Relations<br>with Marie de Verrières—And with Mme. Favart<br>—Persecution of Mme. Favart and her Husband<br>—Imprisonment of a suspected Rival . . . . . | 70 |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|

## CHAPTER IX

|                                                                                                                                              |    |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| For L'Evêque, the Bastille of the Comedians—Some<br>notable Prisoners—Le Kain—Mlle. Clairon—Mme.<br>Saint-Huberty, and many others . . . . . | 80 |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|

## CHAPTER X

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |    |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Mlle. Clairon compared with Mrs. Siddons—Her humble<br>Origin—The Discovery of her Talents—Her Career<br>at Rouen and in Flanders—Her Influential Protec-<br>tors—Her Removal to Paris—Her Pose as a Dragon<br>of Virtue—List, probably incomplete, of her Twenty-<br>two Lovers . . . . . | 94 |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|

## CHAPTER XI

|                                                                                                                                                                                                |     |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Anecdotes of Mlle. Clairon and her Lovers—How she en-<br>riched herself at their Expense—Her Comparative<br>Fidelity to the Comte de Valbelle—Correspondence<br>closing that Liaison . . . . . | 105 |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|

## CHAPTER XII

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |     |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Mlle. Clairon's Affection for the Actor Larive—Her<br>cynical Advice to him as to the Conduct of his Life—<br>Her Distress at his Marriage—She consents to<br>become the Left-handed Consort of the Margrave of<br>Anspach . . . . . | 114 |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|

# CONTENTS

## CHAPTER XIII

|                                                                                                                                        | PAGE |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|
| Life at Anspach—The Margravine is stiff—Mlle. Clairon demands "Explanations"—Her Jealousy of Lady Craven—Her Return to Paris . . . . . | 124  |

## CHAPTER XIV

|                                                                                                                                                            |     |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Mlle. Clairon and M. de Staël—Interesting Documents discovered in the Tower of the Archives at Coppet—Love-letters—M. de Staël makes Settlements . . . . . | 135 |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|

## CHAPTER XV

|                                                                                                                                                                                       |     |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| M. de Staël unable to carry out his Pecuniary Engagements to Mlle. Clairon—She sues him, obtains Judgment and levies Execution—The final years of Obscurity and Destitution . . . . . | 144 |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|

## CHAPTER XVI

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |     |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Mlle. Montansier—A Young Woman from the Country—Becomes the fashion as "La belle Béarnaise"—"Known to the Police"—Financed in Theatrical Management by an Admirer—Her Success at Nantes—And at Versailles—Marie-Antoinette's Friendship for her—She applies for a Monopoly of all the Theatres in France—Her Plans upset by the Revolution . . . . . | 148 |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|

## CHAPTER XVII

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |     |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Mlle. Montansier's Theatre in the Palais Royal—Her Salon attended by the Voluptuaries of the Revolution—Her Performances at Brussels under the Protection of Dumouriez—Her Imprisonment during the Terror—Her Release after Thermidor . . . . . | 159 |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|

## CHAPTER XVIII

|                                                                                                                                                                                        |     |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Mlle. Montansier introduced by Barras to General Bonaparte—Engaged to be married to Bonaparte—Why the Engagement was broken off—Marriage with the Actor Neuville—Later Years . . . . . | 169 |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|

# CONTENTS

## CHAPTER XIX

|                                                                                                                                           | PAGE |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|
| Mlle. George—Discovered and Trained by Mlle. Raucourt— <i>Début</i> —Admirers—Lucien Bonaparte—Prince Sapieha—The Lap of Luxury . . . . . | 177  |

## CHAPTER XX

|                                                                                                                 |     |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Mlle. George and Napoleon—The Emperor's <i>Grisette</i> —Account of the Liaison in her <i>Memoirs</i> . . . . . | 191 |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|

## CHAPTER XXI

|                                                                                                                                                                                                       |     |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Mlle. George in Russia—Unsuccessful Attempt to seduce the Emperor Alexander—Relations with Benckendorf—Departure from St. Petersburg—Visit to Jerome Bonaparte—Last Interview with Napoleon . . . . . | 201 |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|

## CHAPTER XXII

|                                                                                                                    |     |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Mlle. George and Harel—A Queen of the Romantic Movement—Triumphs at the Odéon and the Porte Saint-Martin . . . . . | 209 |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|

## CHAPTER XXIII

|                                                                                                            |     |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Death of Harel—Mlle. George in the Provinces—Decline of her Popularity—Her Poverty and her Death . . . . . | 218 |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|

## CHAPTER XXIV

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |     |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Marceline Desbordes-Valmore—Her Literary Genius and her Romantic Secret—An Actress through the Force of Circumstances—The Mysterious Lover who Loved and Rode Away—Marceline marries the Actor Valmore . . . . . | 224 |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|

## CHAPTER XXV

|                                                                                                                                 |     |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Identification of Marceline's Mysterious Lover—H. de Latouche—He comes again into Marceline's Life after her Marriage . . . . . | 233 |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|



# CONTENTS

## CHAPTER XXVI

PAGE

|                                                                                                                                                                                  |     |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| The Sufferings of Marceline—She discovers that Latouche has fallen in love with her Daughter—Termination of her Friendship with Latouche—His Death—Marceline's Old Age . . . . . | 242 |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|

## CHAPTER XXVII

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |     |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Talma—Studies Dentistry in London—Practises Dentistry in Paris—Dentist to the Duc de Chartres—Correspondence on the subject with his Father—Goes on the Stage—Admitted to the Comédie Française—Triumphs in <i>Charles IX</i> —Obliged to leave the Comédie Française on account of his Political Opinions . . . . . | 248 |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|

## CHAPTER XXVIII

|                                                                                                                                                                                              |     |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| The first Mme. Talma—Her Pre-Matrimonial Adventures—The Charm of her Character—Her Salon during the Revolution—The <i>Rendez-vous</i> of the Girondins—Talma's Divorce and Second Marriage . | 257 |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|

## CHAPTER XXIX

|                                                                                                                                                       |     |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Talma and the Princess—Meeting with Pauline Bonaparte at Aix-les-Bains—Flirtation—Correspondence—Talma's Passion and Pauline's Indifference . . . . . | 267 |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|

## CHAPTER XXX

|                                                                                               |     |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Further Correspondence—Increasing Coldness of the Princess—Talma consoled by Mlle. Bazire . . | 278 |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|



## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

|                                               |                                            |
|-----------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| <b>MADemoiselle GEORGE . . . .</b>            | <i>To face page</i><br><i>Frontispiece</i> |
| <b>ARMANDE BÉJART (1643-1700) . . . .</b>     | <b>16</b>                                  |
| <b>ADRIENNE LECOUVREUR . . . .</b>            | <b>38</b>                                  |
| <b>MADemoiselle DESBORDES-VALMORE . . . .</b> | <b>224</b>                                 |
| <b>TALMA . . . .</b>                          | <b>248</b>                                 |
| <b>PAULINE BONAPARTE . . . .</b>              | <b>266</b>                                 |





# ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

## CHAPTER I

The French Attitude towards the Romance of the Theatre.

SINCE we are to give a little time to the Romances of the French Theatre, let us begin by considering just how the French view of theatres, actors, and—more particularly—actresses, differs from our own.

Our English outlook was, for a long time, purely puritanical. The theatre, a large circle held, was the accursed thing, and the less one had to do with it, the better. One could not touch pitch without being defiled; there never was smoke without fire; the descent to Avernus was easy. But those sentiments have passed out of fashion. We have become broad-minded; and it is difficult to become broad-minded in a hurry without losing one's mental balance; and it must be conceded that there are those among us who have failed to surmount the difficulty.

One need not inquire whether the change of attitude is due to a stiffening of standards on the one side of the barrier or to a relaxation of them on the other. It is enough to note the fact of the *rapprochement* and its consequences: the stretching of hands across the footlights; the cordial understanding between

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

Bohemia and Suburbia; the warm gush of generous sentiment over the discovery that the *soubrette* and the *ballerina assoluta* are, in private life, austere exemplars of those domestic virtues—"more precious than rubies"—which the great middle class used to consider peculiarly its own. The spectacle is very pleasing, and very touching; though cynical foreigners, unaccustomed to our ways, and incapable of our sensibility, are sometimes puzzled to know what to make of it. Let us present a picture—purely imaginary, of course, and yet quite typical.

What we see is a young woman scampering about the stage in gauzy transparencies—*nue sous son manteau*; and what we hear is a chorus of the women of Society and Suburbia, fascinated by the agility and suggestiveness of her movements, exclaiming with one accord: "How beautiful it is! How wonderful! Above all, how chaste! Allegorical you know, and symbolical, and all that sort of thing! Quite a moral lesson! And such a nice girl too, I'm told—so quiet and so modest! Oh! yes, I assure you, really! Makes her baby sister say its prayers to her every day before she comes to the theatre. I know it for a fact because I've seen a photograph of it. Quite the sort of person to know, don't you think? We must see if we can't get her to come to lunch some day. I'm sure the dear Archdeacon would like to meet her." And the dear Archdeacon—if the right Archdeacon be selected—proves every whit as broad-minded as his hostess.

That fancy picture—sketched in strict accordance with the latest laws of perspective—fairly displays one aspect of our new attitude towards the theatre. Another aspect of it is manifested in the long list of the marriages which have, of recent years, united the

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

higher ranks of Society with the humbler (or if not the humbler, at all events the more subordinate) representatives of the Stage.

There have, no doubt, been limits to the rejoicing of Society over such unions. One infers as much from the secrecy with which most of them have been celebrated: a secrecy suggesting that the bridegrooms had qualms, and feared that their doings at the Registry Offices were not merely unusual but nefarious. Society, in short, has not yet opened its arms to the chorus-girl; and even Harley Street can hardly be said to have done so. A certain fear indubitably still prevails in aristocratic circles that, even if the chorus-girl is a young woman of unimpeachable decorum and strong domestic instincts, she is nevertheless likely to have undesirable relatives and to eat peas with a knife. In such circles, therefore, when the first curiosity about her has been gratified, her welcome is more often cold than cordial; but, on the other hand, ample amends is made for the chilliness of Mayfair by the unprejudiced enthusiasm of Fleet Street. At the first rumour of such a wedding, the news-editors prick up their ears, and the reporters hail cabs, and set forth in pursuit of the particulars. Not a smile is on their lips, and they do not even laugh in their sleeves, but sincerely congratulate the bridegroom on his good fortune, and lavish the epithets of encomium on the bride. She is beautiful, she is charming, she is fascinating. She is fond of her art, and equally fond of motoring; she is a student of Meredith and a benefactress of the poor. She wears costly furs, and has a cottage up the river in which she loves to be alone with nature and a select party of congenial friends. To see her is to be conquered, and to take tea with her is a liberal education. And

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

so on, and so forth—all under the familiar head-lines :  
“ Stage and Peerage—Another Romantic Marriage.”

Such things seldom happen in France; and when they do happen, the French do not view them in that light, or gush over them with that facility. They may, in such a case, congratulate the bride in the spirit in which they would congratulate an angler who had hooked and landed an exceptionally fine salmon; but they no more express envy of the fortune of the bridegroom than they would express envy of the fortune of the fish. They did not do so even when the son of an ex-President of the Republic married the divorced consort of one of the leading players of the day. Still less do they do so when the lady who carries off the *spolia opima* in the matrimonial scramble is one of those whom they nowadays classify as “ *Les Gabys*.” Their view of the matter, in short, is still pretty much what it was in the old days when, if a young man was believed to be contemplating such an alliance, his indignant father applied, as a matter of course, for a *lettre de cachet*, and had him lodged safely, out of harm’s way, in a prison. If, they argue, such unions could rightly be styled romantic at a time when such risks attached to them, the cessation of the risks, at the time of the fall of the Bastille, left them merely ridiculous.

Perhaps the French view is wrong, and the English view is right. Or it may be that, the conditions in the two countries being different, there is something to be said for each view in the country in which it prevails. The members of the old Playgoers’ Club used, at one time, to discuss the matter in an upper chamber in the Strand at frequent intervals, and with admirable eloquence; but there is no need to discuss it here. All that is here requisite is to state



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

the French point of view quite clearly, and at the same time to insist that the average Frenchman who adopts it, and professes to see something incongruous, if not absolutely unnatural, in the fusion of the theatrical and *bourgeois* worlds, is by no means to be taken as implying contempt either for the art of acting or for those who practise it. He esteems the art far more seriously than we do, and he bases his admiration for the artists upon more relevant reasons. That is to say, he “distinguishes,” after the fashion of his race, and approaches the question with the precision of the sociologist.

He distinguishes, in the first instance, between an actress and a *théâtreuse*—between, let us say, a Rachel and a Gaby. The Gabys of this world are a source of infinite and perpetual diversion to him—never less so than when they are discovered to have ensnared the hearts of the illustrious, of a king, let us say, of the Belgians, or of Portugal. But he never characterises them as “sweet”; he never gushes; he never tries to see them as other than they are; he never affects to believe that profound passion or tender sentiment lies at the root of their successful enterprises. Delilah is, for him, the prototype to whom they all conform. He sees in their triumphs the eternal irony of the great Human Farce—greed gaining its satisfaction by playing upon the lust of the flesh; and he absolutely refuses to see anything else. The *théâtreuse* in short, is, for him, a purely comic personage.

The case of the actress, of course, is different. She is an artist, and therefore interesting to artists: a vivid and vital personality, and therefore interesting to mankind. One cannot say that, of course, of every woman who calls herself an actress: but it is true of all the actresses who count. In their case, too, however,



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

the Frenchman, while admiring and even rendering, in some instances, a fulsome homage, retains his sense of proportion, and his perception of differences. There are no blurred outlines on his mental map of Society, or in his mental diagrams of Social figures. He has not our sentimental anxiety to demonstrate that everybody is exactly like everybody else; nor is he contemptuous of everybody who is not exactly like everybody else. It is a truth to him (whereas to us it is only a saying) that "it takes all sorts to make a world"; and he classifies the sorts, like a man of science, without passion or *parti pris*, distinguishing, in the case before us, the actress from the *bourgeoise*, in the same spirit in which he distinguishes the bird of freedom from the barn-door fowl.

The two *genera*, it seems to him, are as the poles apart; and the tendency of their several circumstances is not to assimilate them to each other, but to cause them to diverge. Their codes are different; the standards by which they should be judged are different; the virtues and vices of the one are not the vices and virtues of the other. Neither, therefore, is by any means to be held up as a model for the other's imitation. They may respect each other, while simultaneously respecting themselves; and men may properly respect and admire both of them; but this without hypocrisy or confusion of thought—with the full recognition that it is as unreasonable to confine the bird of freedom within the limits of a cage as to let the barn-door fowl run wild in woods.

That being the outlook, it follows that French Romances of the Stage cannot be expected to run on English lines. They do not consist of courtship by *bourgeois* methods; nor do they end with the bird of freedom triumphantly entering the farmyard, arrayed

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

in orange blossoms, and taking her place quietly among the barn-door fowls, while at the same time protesting devotion to her art, and a determination to continue, in the intervals of her home duties, to delight the public with her talents. If that sort of thing happened in France, our Frenchman would smile at it; but as a matter of fact it does not happen—or happens only to such a slight extent that its happening may be ignored. What happens, instead, is that adventures are to the adventurous—or, as some would say, to the adventuresses.

Only, of course, one does not use the word *adventuress* in the conventional deprecatory sense, but employs it merely as the feminine of *adventurer*. Most of the restrictions which prevent women from seeking adventure and giving free play to their instincts and individualities are removed in the case of actresses; and in France it is candidly recognised that those barriers have been broken down. Hence, in the case of the more remarkable among them, a very striking display of the defects of their qualities—in one instance, passion, in others vanity, mutability, ambition, or caprice—arranged in a setting which makes them especially impressive.

In that sense it may be said that all the world is a stage for them; and the performance never lacks spectators, eager to applaud their triumphs—as the populace applauded Mlle. George when Napoleon's valet drove her from the theatre to the Tuileries—and also sympathetic with the sorrows which befell some of them after they had outlived their glories. The stories of such triumphs and such tragedies—together with stories of true and passionate love, and a story here and there of a conversion or a repentance—constitute our subject.

## CHAPTER II

The Rise of the Drama in France—The Story of Molière's unhappy Marriage—Racine and the Actresses.

AN essay on the rise of the drama in France will hardly be expected. It will be quite enough to show, in a paragraph or two, how things shaped themselves, and formed the *mise-en-scène* of the stories which are to follow.

One may note, then, that the French theatre had a triple origin. It can be related to religion, to education, and to the tomfooleries of fairs and markets. The Church, as all the world knows, contributed Mystery Plays; the tomfools entertained the populace with crude farces; the pupils at the schools sometimes composed and performed plays as an incident of the curriculum. The Mystery Plays, in the course of time, degenerated into buffoonery and died out. The scholars and poets, on the other hand, gradually developed tragedies based on classical models; while the farces blossomed into comedies, and the tomfools improved themselves and became comedians.

The comedians were, at first, a wandering folk—"fit-up companies," as we should say—carrying their effects with them, as Thespis did, in carts, and pitching their booths wherever an audience could be assembled. Then gradually, by royal favour, some of them acquired fixed habitations, and were even granted monopolies—a privilege first bestowed, in Paris, on an association known as the Confraternity

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

of the Passion. These Brothers performed Mystery Plays, first at Vincennes, and afterwards in various parts of Paris. They became an Incorporated Society in 1402; and their privileges were confirmed by the Parlement in 1548—but on condition that they gave up Mystery Plays and produced only secular pieces. That was the beginning of the Hôtel de Bourgogne: the first, and for a long time the only, theatre in Paris.

The Brothers, however, found themselves inadequate to their new task. They had done well enough as religious buffoons; but they failed to attract as ordinary actors. Consequently, they decided to exploit their monopoly by leasing their theatre to professional performers, who became known as the Troop of the Hôtel de Bourgogne. That was in 1588. The Troop continued in occupation of the Hôtel de Bourgogne until 1680; but the Confraternity was dissolved—its assets being handed over to a hospital—by Louis XIV, in 1677.

Before that date, however, various encroachments on the monopoly had been permitted. The Courts had decided that rival playhouses must be tolerated, if the rival players paid the Confraternity a fine of three francs for each performance. Under the protection of that ruling, strolling companies from the provinces had, from time to time, appeared in Paris and the suburbs, a certain Théâtre du Marais had enjoyed an intermittent existence, and the Troop of Molière (of which more in a moment) had flourished under royal patronage. And, a year or two later, as we shall see, the foundation of the Comédie Française gave the theatre a definite official status.

Meanwhile the Troop of the Hôtel de Bourgogne did, on the whole, very well. French tragedy



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

flourished under their auspices, and became the fashion when they began to produce the tragedies of Corneille: the first French dramatic author who knew how to assert himself as something more than the servant of the servants of the public. He "raised the price of literature," like Dr. Johnson's favourite literary hero; and it needed raising, though the actors and actresses of the time did not think so:

"Monsieur Corneille" (writes a member of the Troop) "has done us great harm. We formerly bought our pieces for three francs a night. Everybody was accustomed to this arrangement, and we used to make money. Now Monsieur Corneille's plays cost us a great deal, and we make very little."

It was a step in the right direction: a great improvement on the state of things which it superseded. Corneille, at any rate, could afford to give more time to the polishing of his work than his contemporary Du Ryer, who was paid four francs for every hundred Alexandrine verses, and two francs for every hundred verses of eight syllables; and he had no need to be as prolific as Alexandre Hardy, of whom it is related that he wrote and produced no fewer than eight hundred pieces. The calling of a playwright may be said to have gained as much in dignity from his talents as a man of business as from his genius as a poet; though one can understand that the players were, at first, disconcerted, and even aggrieved, by the new conditions.

The actors of those days—or, at all events, of days which the older actors remembered—were accustomed to "tame authors": subsidiary persons like stage-carpenters, agents-in-advance, or baggage-men, who



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

travelled with the company when it went on tour, and made themselves generally useful—playing such minor parts as “noise without,” when called upon. Corneille’s example did more than anything else to put an end to that—with the result that dramatists, taking rank as men of letters, were able to avoid the flavour of Bohemianism, and became great social figures, at a time when the actors were still, in the time-honoured English phrase, regarded as “rogues and vagabonds.” Racine, for instance, was a great man at Court—the personal friend of the King and Mme. de Maintenon—at a time when his great contemporary (who was actor as well as author) was spoken of contemptuously as “un garçon nommé Molière.”

For, after all, the majority of the actors of the time were, or had been, or might be expected to become, strolling mountebanks; and the stationary classes of the population were then, even more than now, disdainful and suspicious of those who had no fixed place of abode. Doubts were entertained alike of the virtue of the wandering women and of the honesty of the wandering men. Their proximity was not supposed to add to the safety of hen-roosts. The patronage of territorial magnates,—the permission sometimes accorded to call themselves the Troop of such-and-such a noble lord—though it protected them from molestation, did little to elevate their status. They were regarded pretty much as we regard tumblers or Punch-and-Judy men; and they had humbly to ask the leave of the magistrates before giving an entertainment in any town to which they came—leave which was as a rule given graciously, but was sometimes surlily withheld. An extract from a speech delivered by a Director of the Comédie

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

Française at the unveiling of the statue of an actor of the first half of the seventeenth century, at Dreux, may give us a picture of their way of life :

“Performances were given when they were possible. On each occasion they were announced by a drum played in the street. A harlequin used to follow the drum, and all the small children came out to see the fun. If the call was not responded to with sufficient liberality, somebody said a polite ‘Thank you’ to those who had been willing to disturb themselves, and the thing was put off till the next day or that day week. But if there happened to be a tolerable audience, the candles were lighted and the performance began. The actors got their supper that night; for after each performance, the money taken at the doors was put upon the table, and the door-keeper gave to each actor his share of the receipts. . . . The fine gentlemen had the privilege of being allowed to sit on the stage. They pushed their chairs about as they pleased, and they hid what was going on from the small people in the pit. They used to get up during the performance, gossip with the actresses behind the stage, talk in a noisy manner, and oblige the actor who was playing to halt in the middle of his wail of despair or of his cry of passion, so that silence might be observed.”

It is a graphic picture of artists struggling against adverse circumstances; and we may take it that artists who did so struggle enjoyed little more social consideration than jugglers and sword-swallowers, even when Jean Poquelin *dit* Molière was one of them.

For Molière went through that mill—deliberately, for the sake of his art—though also, perhaps, a little

## ROMANCES OF 'THE FRENCH THEATRE

for the sake of the bright eyes of Madeleine Béjart; and it was absolutely necessary for him to go through it in order that he might achieve. Mere poets might write great tragedies; but great comedies were only to be written by a man whose genius was guided by experience—who had learnt the limitations of his art and knew what would “get over the footlights” and what would not. And that knowledge—that instinct, rather—was only to be acquired as Molière acquired it: “on the road” in such conditions as have been indicated. One can imagine that those “wander-years” may have seemed to him in retrospect the veritable Calvary of an artist.

It does not seem that his instincts were Bohemian, or that he had any natural desire to live a Bohemian life. He certainly was a scholar—and the friend of scholars; and when one gets close enough to him to judge, he always impresses one as a gentleman. But art called—and the bright eyes of Madeleine Béjart flashed their signal. Not even for the sake of comfort, competence, and respectability could he bring himself to be an upholsterer like his father; and indeed it is not difficult, even when one has the spectacle of the glories of the late Sir John Blundell Maple before one's eyes, to place oneself at the point of view from which upholstering seems an absurd occupation.

It evidently seemed so to Jean Poquelin *dit* Molière. He needed his freedom—and opportunities of self-expression which the trade of an upholsterer does not provide. For the sake of such things, he, though no Bohemian, was willing to live as one; and no doubt the bright eyes of Madeleine Béjart—a few years his senior, and already an actress—did a great deal to reconcile him to the Bohemian conditions, for that is

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

the way of the world when one is four-and-twenty. So he plunged into Bohemia—into the very depths of it—and explored it, until he was sick of it, for thirteen long years of obscurity. Then, at last he emerged, a successful, but nevertheless a melancholy man.

All the world knows how he came to Paris in 1658; how his company were allowed to call themselves, first the King's Brother's Troop, and afterwards the King's Comedians; how they had their fixed theatre—the second fixed theatre in Paris—first at the Petit Bourbon, and afterwards at the Palais Royal; how they made a great sensation with the sparkling satire of *Les Précieuses Ridicules*; how they aroused the jealousies of the Hôtel de Bourgogne; how they formed the nucleus of the national theatre which still flourishes. These matters belong to the full-dress History of the Stage, and are outside our scope. We can merely note them, and pass on to note the social conditions—the partial escape from Bohemia—the traces which Bohemia had left.

As regards the social difficulties against which actors had to contend, the following note by Molière's colleague, La Grange, on the circumstances in which the Petit Bourbon house was closed, is instructive and significant :

“ On Monday, October 11 ” (writes La Grange), “ M. de Ratabon, surveyor of the royal buildings, began to pull down the Petit Bourbon Theatre without giving notice to the Troop, who were much surprised to find their theatre taken from them. Complaint was made to the King, to whom M. de Ratabon said that the site of the theatre was necessary for the building of the Louvre, and that, as the interior of



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

the theatre had been planned for the royal ballets and belonged to his Majesty, he had not thought it necessary to consider the claims of the theatre while the work at the Louvre was being pressed forward."

Implying, of course, that actors were of no more account than performing dogs, but might be whipped out of the way without ceremony when no longer wanted to perform.

That was the sort of insolence which Molière had to face and fight. The good which he did by fighting it lived after him; but his victory was very far from complete. He behaved like a gentleman, and he dressed like one—"like a nobleman," according to his biographer, and not without the help of a valet. He also gave alms on a lordly scale, and collected works of art like a dilettante. But his position handicapped him, and he was made to feel it. The Archbishop of Paris denounced him as an impious rogue on account of *Tartuffe*. The Academicians declined to admit him to their ranks. To the King and the Court, he was not a man of letters like Corneille and Racine, but merely a mimic and a jester. Even the announcement of his Civil List pension compared him unfavourably with Corneille, who got two thousand francs as "the greatest dramatic poet in the world," whereas Molière was only awarded one thousand as "a clever writer of comic verse." He stood to Corneille, in short, in the estimation of his contemporaries, much as, let us say, Thomas Hood stands to Alfred Tennyson in ours.

With the result that, knowing his own genius, he ate his heart out with disgust. His biographer reports his confidences to a young man who proposed to follow the calling of a comedian :



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

“ I suppose you think our profession is full of amenities. If so, you are very much mistaken. It is true that the aristocracy appear to run after us. In actual fact they merely exploit us for their pleasures; and our position as the slaves of their caprices is a very melancholy one. . . . By the rest of the world we are regarded as abandoned creatures, and despised accordingly.”

And then again :

“ Consider what we have to put up with. Whether it suits us or not, we have always to be ready to obey the word of command—to amuse even when our hearts are sore—to endure the boorishness of the society in which we are condemned to live—to win the favour of a public which has the right to grumble because we take its money.”

That in general; and, in particular, there was trouble from the adhering stains of the Bohemian period.

The bright and beautiful eyes of Madeleine Béjart, which had lured Molière on, had lost some of their beauty and brightness as she grew older. Falling out of love with her, he had fallen in love with Armande Béjart instead. It is uncertain whether Armande was Madeleine's younger sister or her illegitimate daughter. The story, on either hypothesis, leaves an unpleasant impression of the promiscuity of the showman's booth; and dignity was altogether lacking in the scenes which ensued when Madeleine discovered that Molière and Armande were married :

“ The Béjart ” (writes Grimarest) “ preferred the



*Aimande Bojart.*

1643-1700.



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

position of Molière's mistress to that of his mother-in-law. Consequently he dared not take the risk of telling her that he intended to marry her daughter. He decided to do so without her knowledge; but she kept him under such close observation that nine months passed before he found an opportunity of consummating his marriage."

In the end the wife invaded the husband's apartment, and insisted; and the mother-in-law learnt the truth, and "made a scene of fury and despair as though Molière had married her rival": a scene which may be regarded as tragedy or comedy, according to the taste and fancy of the spectator, but must, in any case, have been very embarrassing to an actor just making his *début* in the rôle of *comédien-gentilhomme*.

The marriage is said to have been unhappy. Armande is said to have been untrue, and Molière is said to have suffered—unable to cease loving her in spite of the coldness which she was at no pains to disguise. Very likely; but one may suspect that he also suffered because his affections thus dragged him back into the mud of the "wander years," and because of the handle thus given to those—and they were many—who resented the idea that a comedian should pretend to be a gentleman; and the anecdote is, at any rate, helpful as an indication of the place of the stage in the social life of the times.

It was an age of gallantry. Gallantry had succeeded to chivalry. Men were agreed that gallantry was more amusing than chivalry—chiefly because it could be practised with less trouble. But the theatre was not yet the recognised objective of gallantry—or not, at any rate, of those ambitious

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

gallants who aspired to cut a dash. It still lacked splendour. The women were only beginning to emerge, in public esteem, from the rank of trollops and baggages. They were overworked and underpaid, and in no state to make conditions with their admirers. The age of the Queens of the Theatre, richly befurred and bejewelled—"reserving their great passions for men with great possessions"—was near at hand; but it had not begun as yet.

Perhaps we may date that Golden Age (if the phrase may pass) from the passion of Adrienne de Lecouvreur for Maurice de Saxe. It certainly would not have occurred to Maurice de Saxe to trouble himself overmuch about the actresses of Molière's day; and such romances as we do hear of at that period are mostly confined to the family-party of actors and dramatic authors. There was the case, for instance, of the great Corneille, who fell in love with Mlle. Du Parc at a time when he was too elderly to please her; and there is the case of Racine, who, in the splendour of his youth, took Mlle. Du Parc away from the great Corneille—and who afterwards loved Mlle. Champmeslé. But details are lacking; and the only detail which matters in the case of Racine is that he repented and turned his back on the theatre at the age of thirty-seven.

He had been brought up at Port Royal—the head-quarters of those Jansenists whose strict morality formed the motive of that popular modern novel, *La Maison du Pêché*; and the glories and gaieties of the world had tempted him. He had walked into the House of Sin, and diverted himself in its gilded halls—though without any scandalous excesses—"not knowing he should die a holy man." He had loved as we have seen, Mlle. Du Parc, and Mlle.



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

Champmeslé; and then, without giving any reason to any one whom the matter did not concern—and he held that it concerned no one but himself—he suddenly “renounced,” resolving to devote himself thenceforward to his religious duties, and, at the same time, marrying and settling down. But he did not marry an actress—though he had loved two actresses at least: he married a *bourgeoise* of simple tastes and pious habits.

“Neither love nor money,” writes Louis Racine, his biographer, “was the motive of his marriage.” But Louis Racine tells us nothing more than that; and we are free to guess what we like.

### CHAPTER III

Foundation, Constitution, and Tribulations of the Comédie Française  
—Mlle. Champmeslé.

MOLIÈRE died in 1673; and one may almost say that he died heroically. He was ill with inflammation of the lungs—and probably with consumption also—but he refused to take even a day's rest. "There are fifty poor workpeople," he said, "who live on their day's pay; what would they do if there were no performance? I should reproach myself if I were to keep their bread from them for one day, being actually able to give it to them." So he struggled through his part, and went home to have a fatal hæmorrhage. His death very nearly broke up the company; but his widow and La Grange managed to keep it together.

Their difficulties were manifold. On the one hand their rivals of the Hôtel de Bourgogne made overtures to the stars; on the other hand Louis XIV wanted their hall for Lulli and the Opera. He seems to have thought that Molière's Troop without Molière was as negligible as a troop of performing dogs without their trainer; so he gave them notice to quit. But—*il n'y a pas d'homme nécessaire*. Molière, though he had tripled the parts of actor, author and manager, had trained his company so well that they were not dependent on him. Among other things, he had taught them *esprit de corps*. They hung together, and established themselves in another playhouse in

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

the Hôtel Guénégaud. It was while they were there that the King, in 1680, signed in his camp at Charleville, a decree amalgamating them with the "great comedians"—that is to say, the tragedians—of the Hôtel de Bourgogne.

That was the beginning of what we may call indifferently the Comédie Française and the Théâtre Français. A single theatre, in which comedy and tragedy should be given alternately, was intended to suffice for Paris. The Opera, of course, was to have a separate existence; and a separate Italian theatre was also to be permitted; but all the available French dramatic talent was to be concentrated in this one establishment. It is likely enough that art, and the dignity of art, gained more from the concentration than they would have gained from open and unregulated competition; but the dignity was still incomplete, and further unpleasant embarrassments were in store for the players. In 1687 they were once more turned out of their theatre—though, this time, they received three months' notice to go—and put, as people say, "on the pavement."

It was the clergy who had brought about their eviction. They were about to open a new College near the Hôtel Guénégaud; and they represented that the proximity of comedians—and more particularly of comédiennes—would corrupt the morals of their pupils. The King took the clerical view of the matter, and the comedians had to move, without receiving a penny of compensation for disturbance, or getting any help in their search for other premises. Wherever they proposed to settle, they encountered ecclesiastical objections. One priest protested that their presence would destroy the respectability of his parish; another that the fiddles of their orchestra

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

would be overheard by the worshippers in his church. Louis, growing pious as he grew old, lent a sympathetic ear to such arguments; and it was not until 1689 that the actors, after long negotiations, settled in the Théâtre de la Rue des Fosses.

Their monopoly, combined with their official status, enhanced their dignity; and they may be said to have nursed their dignity in the interest of their art—glorifying their profession in order that their profession might glorify them. They were no longer easygoing mountebanks, but, in some degree, functionaries of the State: not important functionaries, but still functionaries who had some chance of making themselves important. There was no fusion, indeed, nor any attempt at fusion, with the aristocracy, or even the middle classes—the French genius for classification forbade, as it still forbids, that sort of thing. But, if they were still reckoned as Bohemians, they began to belong, at any rate, to *la haute Bohême*.

Their position, even so, was not without its drawbacks. As servants of royalty, they had to submit to a discipline which was not always agreeable. The idea of a special prison for comedians may seem absurd to us; but such a prison existed in Paris until the very eve of the French Revolution. An actor or an actress could be detained there for “guying” a part, or for capriciously refusing or resigning it. An actress might even be sent there on some frivolous pretext when her actual offence was her refusal to respond to the advances of an influential nobleman. We will speak of the prison in more detail when we come to the notable cases of imprisonment.

Noblemen, too, were sometimes able to foist their mistresses on the theatre, without much reference to their histrionic talents, in order to exempt them from

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

the jurisdiction which the police normally exercised over the women of the town; while the Church maintained the view expressed by a fourth-century priest that "comedy was worse than blasphemy, theft, homicide, and all other crimes." Theoretically, no actor was permitted to receive any sacrament, from baptism to extreme unction, or might be buried in consecrated ground; and the theory was often, though not always, translated into practice. It was only through the intervention of the King that Molière received Christian burial; and Mlle. Champmeslé had to renounce, on her death-bed, the calling in which she had won glory, before she was accorded the last consolations of religious ritual. One is not surprised to find that, when the Revolution came, a good many comedians were in favour of the policy of cutting off the heads of priests.

Yet, in spite of these drawbacks, which cannot be called inconsiderable, the theatre made progress in public esteem. The best of the comedians took pride in their calling, and were careful of their deportment. Both actors and actresses learned the great art—*se faire valoir*: not as citizens, indeed—the principle that a mime was unfit to be a citizen was maintained until the Revolution, and fought for even then—but, at any rate, as artists, and individuals. They belonged to the Department of the King's *Menus Plaisirs*. Royal carriages fetched them to Versailles to perform their pleasant functions. The Court was at once a school of manners in which to graduate, and a stage on which to display their personal qualities. It was an opportunity for actresses to be admired and become the fashion; and the way was paved for the attainment of a kind of glory which, a little while before, had hardly seemed attainable.



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

There was to be the glory, for instance, of *Le Kain* : a gentleman and a scholar like *Molière*—a much better actor than *Molière*, though not a dramatic author ; a notable reformer in the matter of stage-management ; the first to revolt against the use of the offensive word “Troop” ; the personal friend of *Garrick* and *Voltaire*. There was also to be the glory of *Adrienne Lecouvreur*, whose passion for *Maurice de Saxe* was to make a Duchess jealous ; the glory of *Hippolyte Clairon*, who was to pass seventeen years as a left-handed Margravine, and then, in her extreme old age, to fascinate the husband of *Mme. de Staël* ; the glory of *Mlle. Montansier*, whom *Napoleon*, as *General Bonaparte*, had serious thoughts of marrying ; the glory of *Mlle. George*, who was to be *Napoleon’s* mistress and to aspire to be the mistress of *Alexander of Russia* ; the glory of *Talma*, who, though there is no truth in the story that he coached *Napoleon* in imperial deportment, was at any rate allowed to write love-letters to *Napoleon’s* frivolous sister *Pauline* ; and there were many other glories which shall be dealt with in their place.

Such honours as *Molière* received during his life can hardly be reckoned as an anticipation of those glories. He had to fight for them, and he barely won them, in spite of the fact that the King consented, in a moment of indulgence, to act as the sponsor of his child. He certainly did not win them for his wife, whose reputation was very roughly and disrespectfully handled by her contemporaries, and who never achieved any sort of social position through either her talents or her amours. Such adumbration as we do find of the distinctions which were to come can be discovered only in the career and triumphs, already referred to, of *Mlle. Champmeslé*.

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

She, at any rate, was a personage, off the stage as well as on it, and had her salon, which was frequented by both men of fashion and men of letters; some of the men of letters being men of fashion too. We have seen how her fickleness rendered a service to religion by deciding Racine to become a holy man. He and Boileau, in their hot youth, drank a great deal of champagne in her apartments—"you know," the latter reminded him, "at whose expense." La Fontaine, too, was sufficiently intimate to express a sentimental regret that he was "only a friend." And there were others. Notably there was Mme. de Sevigné's gay son Charles, who sowed his wild oats with such a lavish hand.

There is no material for a story: a *vignette* is the most that can be attempted, with Mme. de Sevigné's Letters for our inspiration. So helped, we may picture the susceptible young man drawn this way and that, dividing his attentions between Mlle. Champmeslé and Ninon de L'Enclos—the most fashionable actress and the most fashionable light o' love of his period—taking part in "delicious suppers," and engaging in "diableries"; while his mother urges the prior claims of his religious obligations. We may also, exploring the same source, picture the actress throwing the young man over, and his mother, speaking now not as a *dévoté* but as a woman of the world, exhorting her son to behave as a gentleman, and burn the actress's compromising letters. "You see by this," she wrote, "what a regard I have for the reputation of an actress."

Decidedly, therefore, Mlle. Champmeslé may be said to have made a beginning, and to have foreshadowed the fame of many of her successors—among others of her niece Mlle. Desmares, who was to bear

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

a child to the Duc d'Orléans. But her time was nevertheless a time of transition. She was ahead of her time; but her successors were to make a much further advance on the same road. She counts for a good deal less in social history than Adrienne Lecouvreur and Mlle. Clairon and several others whom we shall meet; and that inferiority was inevitable, because the theatre was only just beginning to be an important institution.

The increase in the importance of the theatre coincides, curiously enough, with a decline in the merits of the plays. Voltaire may have been a greater man than either Corneille or Racine; but he certainly was not comparable to them as a playwright. Still, the time of his supremacy was a time of progress: a time when adventurous men began to look to the theatre for romance, and the theatre—represented chiefly by the actresses—responded to the appeal. We are approaching the time, that is to say, when Maurice de Saxe made havoc of their hearts, and paid his court, not only to Adrienne Lecouvreur, but also to Mme. Favart, the *Demoiselles de Verrières*, and many others.

## CHAPTER IV

The Advent of Maurice de Saxe—Mlle. Gautier, the Comédienne who became a Carmelite.

IF the advent of Maurice de Saxe has nothing to do with the history of the drama, it plays a great part in the annals of the *coulisses*. He was the son of Augustus the Strong of Saxony and the notorious Aurora von Königsmarck : a brilliant soldier promoted to the rank of colonel at the age of seventeen, the handsomest man of his time, and an irresistibly dashing lover. He pursued actresses with the zest of a sportsman hunting big game—there is hardly a theatrical romance of his time in which he does not figure. Through one of his romances, he was, as we shall see, the great-grandfather of George Sand. His intimacy with Adrienne Lecouvreur is famous; and we also meet him in the lives of Mme. Favart, the Demoiselles de Verrières, and Mlle. Gautier—the one actress on our list who repented in sackcloth and ashes of her levity.

In Mlle. Gautier's career, however, which we will take first, Maurice de Saxe only flashes for a brief instant in an anecdote of no significance whatsoever. He and she once engaged in a trial of strength, gripping hands to see which of them could bend back the other's wrist. He, on his part, could break crown pieces and horseshoes with his fingers; she on hers boasted that she could roll up a silver plate as if she were making pastry with it. In the end he prevailed over her;



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

but he said that he had never before had so tough a tussle. The story has no moral; but it serves to introduce the actress, almost on the eve of her conversion and retirement from these temptations of her calling, of which she came to speak with sad asperity.

Apparently she was attracted to the stage by those temptations far more than by the love of art. Her parents were of the respectable middle class, and keenly alive to the seamy aspects of a theatrical career. But they were poor; and their daughter was beautiful, and had other friends to whose advice she preferred to listen. They told her that her relatives' prejudices were absurd, obsolete, and narrow-minded; that the Court, and the fashionable people of Paris, took quite another view of the matter:

“ Youth ” (she writes in her *Confessions*) “ readily listens to such talk. But experience soon taught me that a perverted morality is inevitable in the calling unless one is constantly on one's guard against the snares which surround it, seeing that, having no work to do except to learn and remember one's part, one lives in opulence, and enjoys every kind of amusement. . . . What a snare for a heart which thinks only of the present! . . .

“ It is true that I have known persons on the stage whose morals have been as admirable as their talents; but I was not myself one of them.”

Emphatically, she was not. Her confessions name no names—or hardly any; but Duclos, who contributed a Preface to those confessions, is less reticent. He names, among others, the aged Marechal de Wurtemberg, who invited her to visit his Court, to the intense annoyance of a mistress already in possession there.



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

The new favourite, he adds, was "impertinent" to the old one, who had sufficient influence to cause her to be sent home again; and she planned and carried out a scheme of vengeance:

"She went back *incognito* to Wurtemberg, and remained there in concealment for several days, while laying her plans. Then, hearing that the Duke's mistress had gone for a drive, she went for a drive too, sitting behind a pair of very spirited horses; and, galloping up behind her enemy, she carried off the wheel of her carriage and spilt her in a ditch. Then galloping back to her inn, where her post chaise was awaiting her, she jumped into it, and was off over the frontier in time to escape all punishment for the outrage."

A queer memory truly for a nun to cherish in her convent cell; but Mlle. Gautier was not to get her to a nunnery yet awhile. These escapades of gallantry, in which her heart was not involved, were to continue for some time longer. It was not until she really fell in love—passionately and in vain—that she diverted her desires from carnal to spiritual satisfactions.

The object of her passion was her colleague at the Français, Quinault-Dufresne—a proud man who preferred to live austerely. He was the actor who, when the audience called to him to "speak louder," replied by calling upon them, on their part, to interrupt less loudly, and, when required to apologise, did so in these words: "*Messieurs, je n'ai jamais mieux senti la bassesse de mon état que par la demande que je fais aujourd'hui.*" It is also related that he was too haughty to communicate with his inferiors except through the medium of a servant. "Pay the poor devil," was,

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

for instance, his formula for telling his valet to settle the claims of a coachman who had driven him, or a porter who had carried his bag.

There is no proof that he was as supercilious as all that in his dealings with Mlle. Gautier; but, at all events, he refused to marry her. There is no proof, again, that he threw her irregularities in her teeth; but she evidently recognised that they formed the insuperable barrier to her happiness. So she began to go to church—a habit which she had long since abandoned; and when her theatrical companions mocked at her church-going, she continued the practice in the disguise of a woman of the lower orders, until she realised that this was an attempt to serve God and Mammon simultaneously, and that it behoved her to make her choice between the two masters. Then she sought a Confessor.

She had so much to say to the Confessor that it took her three hours to say it; and he, on his part, was so overwhelmed with what he heard that he postponed his exhortations until he had had time to consider his judgment. The upshot of the conference was, however, that the actress resolved to quit the Stage and ask to be received as a boarder in a convent. She wrote letters of farewell to her theatrical associates, though without communicating her new address to them. Placards announcing the sale of her effects by auction appeared on the walls, and she stole away quietly to a cell which had been prepared for her by the sisterhood of Sainte-Perpétue :

“ And, as I entered this, my first retreat, I had an inward experience akin to the outward experience of St. Paul. Just as scales fell from his eyes, so I felt myself transformed into another creature. Climbing

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

to my little room, I felt as if I were ascending into Heaven. There all my past fell away from me. My house, my property, my friends, my pleasures—all these things were wiped out from my recollection. The calm and inward peace which I discovered made me fancy that the whole of my previous life must have been an evil dream."

But the previous life was not to be shaken off so easily. Though Mlle. Gautier only stayed for a little while in Paris, and then moved to another convent near Lyon, the place of her retirement became known, and letters of remonstrance rained upon her, and "the Devil," as she puts it, "set a trap":

"A gentleman whose name every one would recognise if I mentioned it, wrote to me to say that, as I had made up my mind to live a retired life, my best plan would be to let him make me a present of one of his estates, which he would be delighted to settle upon me in due legal form if I would permit him to do so."

A trap undoubtedly; but Mlle. Gautier was not to be caught in it:

"I thanked him most warmly for his offer, but said that, as I had quitted my own house, it would not be a very edifying course for me to go to live in his—and that, however honourable his intentions might be, the world would be liable to misconstrue them."

A reasonable apprehension, and one which illustrates the utility of the wisdom of the serpent in preserving the harmlessness of the dove; but the actress nevertheless had a moment of revolt when

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

her new Confessor recommended the mortification of the flesh. It was not enough, he said, that she should fast, or that she should rise at midnight to pray, her bare knees in contact with the bare floor of cold stone. Her salvation also required that her bare back should be lashed with a scourge. She had better borrow a scourge from the nuns; or, if she preferred it, he would himself provide one. Whereupon, not being as yet a sister but only a convent boarder, Mlle. Gautier expressed herself in wingèd words :

“ What’s that ? The discipline ! I to endure the discipline ? I ? Good Heavens ! What impertinence next ? Nuns may put up with that nonsense if they like, but I certainly shall do nothing of the kind ! ”

So she protested; but she nevertheless went away and did as she was told. “ It hurt so much,” she writes, “ that I fell flat on my face and nearly fainted. The pain kept me awake all night.” So, at dawn, she set forth to see the Confessor at his church and beg him never again to order her so distressing a penance; and he promised not to do so unless she begged him to. “ Your beard will have time to grow a good deal longer before that happens,” she replied; but his beard had hardly grown at all before it was happening. For Mlle. Gautier believed that she had many sins to expiate; and it appeared to her that the most painful way of expiating them was likely to be the most efficacious; so that the taste for the humiliating sting of the lash grew upon her. “ It led me by degrees,” she writes, “ to the religious vocation to which I had previously always felt a keen repugnance.” So she took the further step, and became a Carmelite nun, ceasing to be known as Mlle. Gautier,



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

and taking the name of Sister Augustine. One guesses that she chose it to mark her sense of an analogy between her case and that of Saint Augustine, who had also had "a mind darkened by error and a heart led astray by passion" when he first knelt at the throne of grace.

There were difficulties about her acceptance. The sisterhood was fluttered, much as a modern sisterhood might be if some Belle Otero or Gaby Deslys of our times were suddenly to declare that she had a vocation to become one of them. The Archbishop of Lyon, however, calmed their scruples, and promised to preside at the service of initiation; whereat, "in spite of the severity of the weather, the whole town attended:" our last touch of the vanity of the dramatic artist, anxious that a full house should honour a great performance. When it was over, the audience dispersed; and she who had so lately been a queen of the stage, the idol of the public and the favourite of men of fashion, passed into the cloister, and was assigned base menial duties:

"On the very day of my admission, they put a broom in my hands. I had to wash up the plates and dishes, draw water from the well, scrub the refectory tables, carry up jugs of water to the sisters' cells, and clean the saucepans and the stove; and the performance of these tasks afforded me far greater pleasure than I had derived from the luxurious indolence of my previous life. After four years of such occupations, I was charged with the making of the hempen shoes worn by the Community, and with the winding up of the great convent clock."

Such was her life for the thirty years or so which



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

she was still to live. She tells us that she did not resign herself to it quite without a struggle. The Devil tempted her; and, in order to resist him, she had to practise austerities even more severe than those which the stringent rules of the Order specifically enjoined. She made a vow, for instance, never to touch wine, even if it should be necessary to save her life; and she subjected herself to "violences so great that my hair and my eyebrows, which used to be jet-black, are now quite white."

Those years of retirement have, of course, no history; but we do, nevertheless, now and again, get a passing glimpse at them. The Pope, it appears, whether because he had heard that she was beautiful or for some other reason, gave Mlle. Gautier special permission to appear in the convent reception-room with her face uncovered; and some of her letters, which have been preserved, show her still in occasional contact with the world outside the convent walls. The death of the Comte de Chémeroles, who had long since been her lover, elicited one such letter, addressed to his brother, the Bishop of Rieux; and the Bishop showed it to Duclos.

"I have never seen" (says Duclos) "a letter better composed. It was of eight pages; and though it expressed a faint doubt as to the salvation of the soul of her former paramour, the dominant note of it was trust in the loving-kindness of God. The Carmelite, too, indirectly and respectfully, as became a humble nun addressing a Bishop, gave the latter, whose life was very far from canonical regularity, a certain amount of good advice for himself."

A second letter was addressed to Louis XV's Queen,

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

Marie Leeczinska, whom the Carmelite entreated to find for a nephew of hers a position more favourable to his eternal welfare than that of conductor of the orchestra at the Comédie Française. The Queen, whose piety was exceptional, complied with the request, and continued the correspondence. "I am so happy here," Sister Augustine confided to her, "that my only regret is that I delayed so long before entering this holy dwelling-place."

She was so happy, indeed, and so convinced that piety was the sole source of happiness, that she came to persuade herself that she had always been of the same mind in the matter, and had always hankered after the narrow way, even when she strayed most widely from it. Hence certain inconsistencies in her confessions, which we find curiously juxtaposed. On one page, for instance, we read :

"People sometimes asked me if I ever received the Sacrament.

" 'Certainly not,' I replied.

" 'Why not ?'

" 'I do not like to profane it, and I do not mean to give up my pleasures until I am forty-five.'

" 'And you feel no remorse ?'

" 'Of course not. Why should I feel any ? I am doing no wrong to any of my neighbours. As for the Paradise to come, those are welcome to it who want it. I am quite satisfied with the Paradise which I am at present enjoying.' "

But on the very next page we read :

"God knows what it cost me to cease to be virtuous ! God knows that once, when I was in Flanders, lying

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

at the point of death, I promised Him in all sincerity that I would abandon the perilous calling which circumstances had constrained me to embrace, if only some one would assure me a private income of two hundred francs a year. Some one could have done so—some one indubitably ought to have done so. May God forgive those who were asked to do so and refused ! ”

The two sentiments, rendered on two successive pages of Mlle. Gautier's narrative, do unquestionably clash. We cannot harmonise them, but must be content to choose between them; and we must also make what we can of the implied doctrine that an annuity is a *sine qua non* of chastity. Assuredly it is a curious doctrine for a Carmelite nun to profess; and it seems to show that, even after thirty years of Carmelite discipline, some of the preconceptions of the comédienne still survived.

But very few of them lingered, and those only as instincts which found expression unawares—instincts which the comédienne Carmelite would have repressed with prayer and fasting if she had realised what they meant and in what traditions they stood rooted. Her real self is repressed in those closing words of her confession in which she expresses her desire to “expiate until the hour of my death the evil courses by which my life has been dishonoured.”

She was drawing very near to her death when she wrote those words; and during the last years of her life she was blind. Lying on her truckle bed in her freezing cell, she thought not of the happiness which had been, but of the happiness which was to be—of that Paradise which she had once been content to leave to those who wanted it; and she put her thoughts

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

in verse—addressed to Marie Lecszinska, who had loved her for her piety—and dictated them to the nun who nursed her :

“Thérèse,<sup>1</sup> je t’entends . . . une éternelle vie  
Brise de mon exil les liens importuns :  
Avec une prière offerte par Sophie <sup>2</sup>  
Mon âme va voler sur l’Autel des parfums.

O Reine ! âme céleste et le charme du monde !  
Si sur moi tes regards daignèrent s’abaisser,  
J’implore en expirant ta pitié profonde !  
Demande mon bonheur ! Le Ciel va t’exaucer.”

We may end with that, and then turn—after allowing a sufficient interval for meditation on the vanity of pomps and pleasures—to those very different theatrical scenes in which Maurice de Saxe, mentioned in passing because of his pleasant trial of strength with Mlle. Gautier, continued, while she was shedding the tears of penitence on her knees, to play his voluptuous part.

<sup>1</sup> Patroness of the Carmelites.

<sup>2</sup> One of the Queen’s baptismal names.

## CHAPTER V

Adrienne Lecouvreur—Her Early Struggles in the Provinces—  
Jilted by the Comedian Clavel—And by her Protector Klinglin  
—Her *Début* in Paris—The Hearts at her Feet.

THE most notable of the theatrical names associated with Maurice de Saxe is indubitably that of Adrienne Lecouvreur. His passion for her belongs to the same period of his life as his trial of strength with Mlle. Gautier, who was, for a little while, her rival at the Français. Perhaps the romance, when one comes to look at it closely, is a little less romantic than sentimental writers have represented. Indubitably our impression of it owes a great deal to the famous drama by Scribe and Legouv  , and to the passionate rendering of the leading *r  le* first by Rachel, and subsequently by Mme. Bernhardt. "You have discovered," Scribe said enthusiastically to his collaborator, when he proposed the subject, "the only means of making Rachel speak in prose."

And that may well have been—the part, at any rate, fitted Rachel like a glove. It admitted of a sincerity—of the introduction of a personal note—impossible in the case of either Racine's tragedies or Victor Hugo's romantic extravaganzas. Rachel wept real tears, even at rehearsals, over Adrienne's fate, thinking, as she told the author, that Adrienne's fate would also be hers, and that "time would soon carry away every trace of my talent, and that nothing would remain of that which had once been Rachel."





*Adrienne Lecouvreur*



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

Dying herself, and at last aware that she was dying, she easily moved her audience to

“Weep for her the doubly dead,  
In that she died so young.”

These were the pathetic lines which drew the tears :

“Mon Dieu ! Exaucez-moi. Mon Dieu, laissez-moi vivre . . . quelques jours encore. . . . Je suis si jeune, et la vie s’ouvrait pour moi si belle !

“La vie ! La vie ! Vains efforts ! Vaine prière ! Mes jours sont comptés ! Je sens les forces et l’existence qui m’échappent !

“Ô triomphes du théâtre ! mon cœur ne battra plus de vos ardentes émotions ! Et vous, longues études d’un art que j’aimais tant, rien ne restera de vous après moi. Rien ne nous survit à nous autres . . . rien que le souvenir.”

All of which was, in fact, far more applicable to Rachel’s own case than to Adrienne’s; for Rachel wasted away slowly, with abundant time for farewells and regrets, whereas Adrienne died almost suddenly, and in an agony which one cannot believe to have been compatible with any such long lament for the vanishing glories of the footlights. Her death was attributed to poison, administered by a jealous rival for the heart of Maurice de Saxe; but that is a legend which we shall have to investigate and discredit—first prefacing the investigation with a word or two about Adrienne’s rise to fame.

She was a workman’s child—the daughter of a journeyman hatter, born at Damery, in Champagne, on April 5, 1692. Her father came to Paris to pursue his trade. She owed her convent education to charity,

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

and the discovery of her histrionic gifts to chance. She and some other children of her age performed plays for their amusement in a grocer's shop. Mme. la Présidente du Gué, taking an interest in them, invited them to perform in the courtyard of her mansion. The comedians of the Français, considering that the performance infringed their privileges, called upon the Lieutenant of Police to stop it. He did so, sending his archers to disperse the little players; but the performance was nevertheless given, within the precincts of the Temple, where the police had no jurisdiction, and Adrienne's precocious power attracted notice.

Among others Grandval, the actor, noticed her. He learnt that she was the niece of his laundress—he cannot have been long in learning it, seeing that the laundress's daughter was his mistress. Being a teacher of elocution as well as an actor, he offered to give her lessons; and she lived for some time in the same house with him and her cousin. Then, when she was about fourteen, he told her that, if she wanted to succeed in Paris, she had better begin in the provinces; and he sent her off to Lille, with an introduction to a lady who had just been accorded a three years' monopoly of the theatrical amusements of that town.

She remained in the provinces—in Flanders, Alsace, and Lorraine—until 1717. We hear of her not only at Lille, but also at Lunéville, Metz, Nancy, Verdun and Strasburg. Little is known of her life there; but the little that is known suffices to forbid the assumption that Maurice de Saxe was her first and only love. She accepted protectors, and bore children to them—two daughters, both of whom lived to grow up and make good marriages. One of

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

her protectors died, and the others proved fickle. They were men of no importance to any one but Adrienne; and there is no end to be served by burrowing for details. All that matters in the stories is the light which they throw on Adrienne's character.

Her distinguishing qualities seem to have been simplicity and sweetness—one may almost say purity of heart. Lovers, in the circle in which she moved, were almost as much a matter of course as parents,—as much a matter of course, at any rate, as husbands in *bourgeois* circles; but not all mistresses accepted the situation in the same spirit. Adrienne differed from the majority in that she was neither interested nor passionate. No lover, so far as one knows, ever enriched her; she never had a lover whom she did not love; and she never made any wild scene of jealousy when her love was disappointed.

That trait in her character comes out in her relations with the comedian Clavel. How completely he was her lover is uncertain, and may be left obscure; but her two letters to him, which have been rescued by autograph-hunters, though they throw no light on that matter, throw a flood of light on Adrienne's nature and point of view. They are so queerly spelt that one has to guess their meaning—for Adrienne's education, though she had an instinct for culture, had been neglected; but their meaning, when divined, conveys the secret of Adrienne's charm—the charm of the woman who can love deeply, but cannot, for her life, love selfishly.

Clavel, one gathers, had talked of marriage, and then had shown a disposition not to talk of it. He was ambitious, and Adrienne was not yet famous—it looked as if the proposed marriage might be a hindrance to him in his career. The situation, of



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

course, is frequent enough in life; and we have a right to say that we know a woman's nature when we know how she has handled it. Passion dictates one handling of it, pride another; but in Adrienne's handling of it, pride and passion are equally set aside. "I hardly know what to make of your neglect," she begins—as no doubt she had reason to do; but she does not proceed to reproaches. On the contrary, she shows herself divided between two conflicting fears: the fear of saying anything which might seem to show that she herself had ceased to care; and the fear of being married from pity, or from a reluctant and mistaken sense of loyalty:

"Rest assured that you are a hundred times dearer to me on your own account than on mine. I swear that, dear Clavel, and time will prove that it is true. Think of me as I shall always think of you, and I shall be satisfied—my ambition looks no further. . . .

"Nothing, of course, will compel you to do what you do not wish to do; and for myself, fond as I am of you, I should be in the depths of despair if you did anything to please me against your will. Think the matter over carefully while you are still free to do so. Remember that I am penniless, and deeply in debt—that you can make a far better match elsewhere. I have nothing to offer you but my youth, and my good will; and these are not things of any practical use to you. I speak quite candidly, you see, and tell you quite frankly what might attract you to me and what should repel you. So now it is for you to decide. Do not consider my feelings, but avow your own.

"What I say to you is not said from caprice, or because I want to quarrel with you. I love you more

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

than ever, but reason compels me to write to you thus. I beg you, in God's name, to treat me in the same spirit, and deprive me of all right to reproach you on that head. . . . If I lose you, I trust that I shall not lose you altogether, but shall always have a place in your regard. If you are happy, I shall be glad to know it, and glad to think that I have not prevented your happiness; and, if you are not happy, I shall be glad to think that the fault is not mine; and so there will be consolation for me, however things turn out. . . .

“ . . . Good-bye, dear Clavel. I am going to send you this letter at once, for if I were to delay, I might repent having written it. Let me hear from you, whatever your decision may be, and rest assured that I am always true.”

It is a charming letter—admirable in the delicacy of its tone and sentiment : an amazing letter to have been written by the daughter of a working man, who had had no education since she was thirteen, and had been thrown into the theatrical world at the height of the age of gallantry. A veritable genius for simple affection and unselfish self-effacement speaks in it. Adrienne's character was all her own—whence inherited we know not, but assuredly untarnished by the atmosphere of bickerings, jealousies, and intrigues in which she had to live.

Clavel, it seems, took advantage of her unselfishness, spurning her love in the interest of an ambition which, in the end, he only moderately satisfied; and Adrienne, after an interval of mourning, yielded to another lover—one Klinglin, the son of the principal Strasburg magistrate, and was again treated badly. Klinglin, like Clavel, promised her marriage, and failed to keep his promise. She believed his promise,

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

not understanding that men in his position were apt to make such promises to women in hers, without the faintest intention of fulfilling them—that, even if they meant to fulfil them, the remonstrances of their friends and the pressure of their families were almost sure to be obstacles too strong for them to overcome. She was five-and-twenty when Klinglin taught her that lesson by leaving her.

It is said to have been her grief at his desertion of her which impelled her to seek her fortune in Paris. She was so simple-minded, and so little dazzled by the glamour of the limelight, that she may possibly have needed that impulsion. One's impression of her is always that of a woman to whom love was of infinitely more account than glory—a woman, too, to whom love really meant love, and not merely the homage and gifts of rich and illustrious adorers. To Paris, at all events, she came, leaving some of her illusions in the provinces; and glory was hers in abundance. The public accepted her at once; and the favour of the public enabled her to triumph over the insidious intrigues of the *coulisses*.

Just as simple-mindedness was the note of her character, so simplicity was the note of her theatrical success. In a declamatory period she ventured to be natural. While her rivals—and notably Mlle. Duclos—recited their parts in a monotonous sing-song, Adrienne acted as if she were a real person, living a part of her own life. That is to say, she was devoid of staginess, whether on the stage or off it; and that, no doubt, was the secret of her social as well as her theatrical success. She was a woman whom people could know as well as meet—could make a friend of as well as flatter. She did not pose, but played her social part as if she had been born to play it. Above

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

all, she did not lay herself out to make trouble in families by encouraging the wealthy scions of noble houses to squander their substance on her, or load themselves with debts in order to load her with diamonds. So she was the first of the French actresses, and almost the only one to be really "in Society"—she, the gifted daughter of the hatter who worked for a weekly wage.

Of course hearts were at her feet; and of course she was credited with lovers. Among the lovers whom current gossip assigned to her were included Prun-gent, the Duchess of Brunswick's steward, Voltaire, the Earl of Peterborough, and the Chevalier de Rohan; but it is difficult to believe that, in any of these cases, gossip spoke the truth. Adrienne loved love; and next to love she loved friendship; but mere gallantry never appealed to her. Wherever she gave herself, she gave her heart. A great deal of her correspondence consists of exhortations to very eligible lovers not to love her. For instance :

" I am capable of a sincere attachment to you, just as you are capable of sincere gratitude for the sentiments which you inspire in me. If I cannot make you happier, I am very sorry—more sorry than you are yourself. I reproach myself, but I must not deceive you. Caprices are unreasonable, and love is a kind of madness which I have come to hate, and from which I hope to be free for the remainder of my life. You will come to know love in good time, and my present unkindness to you will make you all the happier then. Forgive me if I argue with you and presume to offer you advice. You must be my friend, for I deserve your friendship; but for mistress you must choose a woman whose heart is still virgin,



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

still under the influence of the illusions which make life so beautiful—a woman who has never been betrayed or deserted, who can believe that you are such as you are, and that all men are like you.”

The recipient of that letter cannot be identified; but the story which it indicates and outlines seems to be typical of many stories of this period of Adrienne's life. One finds in it as little of prudery as of any other kind of affectation. To love and to be loved still seems to Adrienne the most natural thing in the world for the people who have kept their illusions. But she has lost hers. She has—so she believes—left her last illusion at Strasburg; and therefore she means to be cynical—but cannot. Her substitute for love is not hate or bitterness, but friendship. Many friendships are to be the links in the gold chain binding her to life; and she probably achieved more friendships than any other actress of her time. The young Marquis de la Chalotais and young d'Argental were two of the lovers who became her friends. In the case of young d'Argental we have enough of the letters to reconstruct the story.

He was a mere boy, and friendship by no means sufficed for him. His parents scented trouble, and dispatched him to London to be out of the way of temptation—or to be ensnared, if it might be, by some alternative and less undesirable temptation. Of course he asked Adrienne to write; of course there was no obvious reason why Adrienne should refuse to do so. She not only sent him the news, but she reasoned with him. She meant to be very tactful—to accustom the young man to the idea of possessing her friendship without her love; but that is, perhaps, of all kinds of tact the most difficult



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

to practise. The border line between love and friendship is so very vague; excessive insistence upon the claims of friendship may so easily be read as an invitation to pass that border line.

Something of the sort evidently happened in this case; and when one reads the letters one recognises that it was almost bound to happen. "Even supposing that no obstacles in the way of duty stand in the path, how," Adrienne asks, "can one abandon oneself to one's natural desire to please and to love, when experience has taught one the perfidy of mankind?" Assuredly the lover's answer to that question was easy; and he must have felt that he was being invited to come home and give it in person when Adrienne began to complain, albeit only as a friend, of his protracted absence:

"Haven't you been away long enough, my dear friend? Don't you understand that I want to see you? Oughtn't you to be much obliged to me for my patience—or rather for my self-denial in not imploring you to return? Not a day has passed without my feeling a hundred temptations to do so. . . . You know how necessary you are to me, and how much I like to see you. . . . You know that I have never trusted any one as I trust you, and that my friendship for you will last as long as I live. . . . You can see me, at first, without any one knowing anything about it. You can come to supper with me whenever you like. . . . Don't tell any one that I have written, and consult only your own heart in answering my letter. . . . Farewell, my dear young friend. I have written enough to let you see what my feelings towards you are, and to decide you to come and see me without loss of time in order to

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

prove to me that friendship is a reality and not a chimera."

Friendship indeed ! A very young man receiving such a letter from a charming actress may very well have doubted whether friendship was all that it was possible for him to win if he persevered. In fact an older man might, in the same circumstances, have entertained an equal scepticism; and a biographer is also disposed to question the interpretation commonly put upon Adrienne's attitude. Sweetness of temper and the desire to avoid giving pain are hardly in themselves sufficient to account for the extreme tenderness of her tone, and the invitation to young d'Argental to sup alone with her, whenever he liked, without his mother's knowledge. Adrienne herself, it can hardly be doubted, was, for the moment, touched by a warmer sentiment than pity.

It is no wonder, therefore, that the young man came scampering home, more passionately in love than ever, with the result that his mother, perplexed and distressed—getting to know, perhaps, about those secret supper-parties—decided that the only way to remove her son from danger was to dispatch him to the West Indies. Whereupon Adrienne wrote his mother, Mme. de Ferriol, a letter which is famous—a letter which all her biographers quote as the supreme proof of her tact and charm and genius for self-abnegation. It was written in reply to the mother's pathetic appeal to the actress to be merciful as she was strong; and it appears to have been written after Adrienne had called on Mme. de Ferriol and been told that she was "not at home." The first paragraph is a defence of the boy-lover who, in the writer's opinion, has been misjudged and misunderstood.

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

“You would admire him,” Adrienne says, “if he were not your son”; and she continues :

“Deign, madam, I beg of you, to ally yourself with me in overcoming a weakness which is an annoyance to you, and in which I am not, whatever you say, an accomplice. Do not be contemptuous with him; do not be harsh. Tender as is my friendship for him, I would rather incur his hatred than tempt him in any way to be undutiful to you. You are too much interested in curing him of his passion not to give your whole mind to the task; but you are also too interested a party to succeed in that undertaking merely by exercising your authority, or by representing me to him in an unfavourable light, even if that light were the true one. His passion must indeed be exceptional, seeing that it has endured so long, though it has been hopeless, in spite of his travels, and in spite of the fact that he has been eight months in Paris without seeing me, in my own apartment at all events, and without any reason to believe that I should ever be willing to receive him there. I thought that he was cured, and that was why I consented to see him during my last illness. You will readily believe that his society would be infinitely agreeable to me if it were not for this unfortunate passion, which astonished me as much as it flatters me, but of which I desire to take no unfair advantage. You fear lest, if he see me, he may neglect his duties, and you carry your fear to the point of threatening him with very violent measures. Truly, madam, it is unfair that he should be made unhappy in so many ways at once. Do not add your unkindness to mine—try rather to make up to him for my unkindness. Divert all his resentment on to my head; but

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

let him feel that your affection is a resource he can rely upon.

“ I will write him whatever sort of a letter you like. I will refuse to see him again if you wish it. I will even, if you think it necessary, go away for a time into the country. But pray do not threaten to send him to the ends of the earth. He may serve his country usefully; his friends will delight in his society; he will satisfy you and make you proud of him; you have only to guide his talents and leave his virtues free to find their own expression. Forget for a while that you are his mother, if you feel that you cannot, as his mother, grant him the favours which I beg for him on my knees. And, to conclude, madam, I would rather either retire into a convent, or permit him to become my lover, than see him continually tormented on my account. ‘

“ Forgive him, then, for a sentiment which you can overcome in him, though I have been unable to keep it within bounds. Add the favour which I now ask from you to those which you have already accorded me, and permit me to believe that my sincere attachment and lively gratitude preserve that good will towards me which I value so highly, and leave me glad to be able to sign myself, with profound respect, your very humble, and very obedient servant,

“ LECOUVREUR.

“ P.S.—Pray let me know how you wish me to act in the matter. If you would like to see me without his knowledge, I will keep any appointment that you care to make; and I promise to do my best, both by my conduct and by my prayers, to make you satisfied with your son and with myself.”

The letter is of an admirable dignity—the mothers



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

of the young men who impetuously seek actresses in marriage do not often receive such letters from the actresses. It is only when we place the letter to young d'Argental's mother side by side with the letter to young d'Argental himself that we perceive that it is not absolutely ingenuous—and that not all the statements contained in it are true. That invitation to the son to come to supper, whenever he likes, without his mother's knowledge, does not accord very well with the statement made to the mother that Adrienne had discouraged him and sought to avoid seeing him. Perhaps such inconsistencies are apt to occur in all correspondences of the kind; but, be that as it may, there the inconsistency is, and one cannot help looking for an explanation of it.

The explanation must be, of course, that, between the writing of the two letters, Adrienne had changed her mind—as, equally of course, she had a perfect right to do. There was no reason why she should hurt young d'Argental's feelings by saying so—she was a woman who could not hurt any one's feelings without hurting her own at the same time. She desired no chilling blast to disturb the soft atmosphere of sentiment and sensibility. Consequently she guarded her secret as long as she could; though it was impossible for her to guard it very long.

But the emotional situation, nevertheless, was not, as the biographers have represented, quite like that portrayed in *La Dames aux Camélias*. Adrienne was not, in fact, sacrificing her Bohemian heart on the altar of *bourgeois* respectability. On the contrary, something had happened. There was Another.

Which is to say that Adrienne had met Maurice de Saxe.



## CHAPTER VI

Adrienne Lecouvreur and Maurice de Saxe—His Infatuation and his Infidelity—Intervention of the Duchesse de Bouillon.

CARLYLE may help us to see Maurice de Saxe. He gives a graphic passing glimpse at him in his *Frederick the Great* :

“He is son of the female Königsmarck called Aurora (‘who alone of mortals could make Charles Twelfth fly his ground’); nephew, therefore, of the male Königsmarck who was cut down long ago at Hanover, and buried in the fire-place. He resembles his father in strength, vivacity, above all things in debauchery, and disregard of finance. They married him at the due years to some poor rich woman; but with her he has already ended; with her and with many others. . . . A dashing young fellow; ‘circular black eyebrows, eyes glittering bright, partly with animal vivacity, partly with spiritual’; stands six feet in his stockings, breaks horseshoes with his hands; full of irregular ingenuity and audacity; has been soldiering about ever since birth almost; and understands many a thing, though the worst *speller* ever known.”

The “male Königsmarck” referred to is, of course, the lover of George I’s Queen Sophia Dorothea, who endured imprisonment for his sake, and whose long-lost love-letters W. H. Wilkins discovered in the library at Lund. The “poor rich woman” was the

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

Comtesse de Löben, from whom Maurice was very quickly divorced, not without reason, but on account of his preference for one of his wife's maids. Already, at the age of twenty-four, he had eleven campaigns to his credit, when, owing to a quarrel with his father—Carlyle's "Saxon Man of Sin"—he left Dresden and obtained permission to enter the French service, in which he ultimately distinguished himself by winning the Battle of Fontenoy. For the moment, however, there was no war, and his triumphs were of another character. "He subdued hearts," it has been written, "as easily as unfortified towns"; and his chief conquest in this direction was of the heart of Adrienne Lecouvreur—"foolish French actress," as Carlyle derisively styles her.

Foolish, perhaps, as folly in these matters goes. Maurice indubitably was a man whom women could only take seriously at their peril; for Maurice's passion was always for the sex in general rather than for any woman in particular. That is to say, he, on his part, practised gallantry; whereas Adrienne, on hers, was solely the creature of sentiment. That, again, is to say that they met on unequal terms; and the upshot of the meeting was bound to be tragic for her. But, in the meantime, she had her hour; and her charm was sufficient to prolong it, though not to make it perpetual:

"From the day that she knew him," writes M. Paléologue, "she was charmed, conquered, entranced; it seemed to her that she only then began to know what life really was. She surrendered to him as she had never surrendered herself to any other."

Maurice, in short, was just an adventurer at the

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

stage door, lightly adding another to a long series of adventures; and Adrienne met him in the spirit of the woman who always believes that her last love is her first, and that her first love will be her last. To some extent, and for some time, her simplicity and disinterestedness tamed him. He was lured further away from gallantry, and further along the track of sentiment than he had ever travelled before. Adrienne was achieving that triumph at the time when she adopted, as we have seen, the maternal tone towards young d'Argental. But her real genius, as we have also seen, was for self-abnegation. If she had unfairly assumed an attitude of self-sacrifice in her letter to Mme. de Ferriol, she was to have every opportunity of exercising the virtue in her relations with Maurice de Saxe.

The time soon came, in 1725, when ambition beckoned Maurice de Saxe in a direction in which Adrienne could not accompany him. The Saxon Man of Sin, having been reconciled to his son, proposed him as a candidate for the vacant Duchy of Courland. "The flower he"—to quote Carlyle again—"of the illegitimate Three Hundred and fifty-four, and probably the chief achievement of the Man of Sin in the world, where he took such trouble." If he would marry Anne Ivanovna, niece of the late Duke Ferdinand, and afterwards Empress of Russia, his success would be almost certain. Anne was a widow, and childless, and, when sounded, said that she was willing—for she had seen Maurice's portrait and admired it. So Maurice set off to pursue the quarry, and was, for once in his life, rebuffed. Carlyle may once more sum the matter up for us :

"Adrienne Lecouvreur, foolish French actress,

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

lent him all the £30,000 she had gathered by holding the mirror up to Nature and otherwise, to prosecute this Courland business; which proved impossible for him. He was adventurous enough, audacious enough; fought well; but the problem was, To fall in love with the dowager Anne Ivanovna, Cousin of Tsar Peter II; big, brazen Russian woman (such a *cheek* the pictures give her, in size and somewhat in expression like a Westphalia ham!), who was the widow of the last active Duke; and this, with all his adventurous audacity, Count Maurice could not do. The big Widow discovered that he did not like Westphalia hams in that particular form; that he only pretended to like them; upon which, in just indignation, she disowned and dismissed him; and falling herself to be Tsarina not long afterwards, and taking Biren the Courlander for her beloved, she made Biren Duke, and Courland became impossible for Count Maurice."

There is one mistake there to be noted. Not £30,000 but only 40,000 francs was the amount of Adrienne's loan; and she had to sell her jewels to raise that moderate sum. Most likely they were jewels which Maurice had given her; so that Carlyle's sarcasm about her means of amassing wealth is ill-informed and out of place. Whether she was "foolish" to part with such treasures for such a purpose is a question which cynics and sentimentalists may thresh out—she herself, in any case, was not the woman to think so. She was in correspondence with Maurice throughout the three years of his absence—taking an intelligent interest in the political situation as well as in his personal fortune. No doubt she persuaded herself that his discomfiture was her



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

triumph; that everything would end well; that she and Maurice would live happily together ever afterwards. She may still have thought that, even if she had her doubts, as she must have had, as to whether Maurice had been absolutely faithful to her.

Maurice, in fact, had by no means been devoting the whole of his energies to the endeavour to fall in love with the "big, brazen Russian woman," but had sought other diversions diligently. The Saxon Ambassador at St. Petersburg says so. "The women," he wrote to the Man of Sin and Father of Three Hundred and fifty-four, "cannot sleep for joy. I wish I had as many thousand crowns as our hero has just made Actæons,"—Actæon with his horns being the mythological emblem of a husband who has been deceived. In spite of these diversions, Maurice returned to Adrienne when the political game was up, and the old relations were resumed; but the old happiness was no longer to be found in them. Her lover, we are told, neglected her in order to study mathematics and the art of fortifications, and to invent a new kind of motor-boat which would travel from Rouen to Paris in twenty-four hours, without the use of either sails or oars. It is improbable, however, that these pursuits were her only rivals; and they can hardly be believed to account for a certain memorable scene which is said to have occurred, one evening, at the Comédie Française :

"Bastide relates" (we are quoting Adrienne's latest French biographer, M. Georges Monval) "that Adrienne, furiously angry at an infidelity on the part of the Comte de Saxe, saw him take his seat in the stalls one day when she was playing *Phèdre*, at the moment when she was saying to Hippolyte :



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

*'Au défaut de ton bras, prête-moi ton épée.'*

"She snatched the sword out of her actor's hand, and hurled it straight at the Count's stomach in the presence of three thousand spectators. This stage-sword gave the *coup-de-grâce* to a love which was already sick nearly to death. A *viveur* and swash-buckler wanted a more 'amusing' mistress than this serious and tearful little sentimentalist. Adrienne was not sufficiently like a woman of the town to please that drunken debauchee. Besides, he had found favour in the eyes of a great lady of very gallant character . . ."

That brings us, or will bring us in a moment, to the Duchesse de Bouillon. In the meantime we pause to note that the scene described is the one really tragic gesture discoverable in the relations of the career of this queen of tragedy. The sudden advent of the unexpected missile, so adroitly aimed, doubtless caused her lover the more surprise on that account. On all other occasions she appears as a woman of the clinging, resigned, submissive type, affectionate rather than passionate, and a frequent invalid.

The frailty of her health may have been one of the reasons why Maurice tired of her. It may have made her melancholy, though one refuses to believe that it made her peevish; and the robust are often unsympathetic in such cases—especially when disappointed ambition worries them. One finds her complaining of trouble with her eyes, and—more particularly—of gastric trouble. "My eyes are better, but I can't say the same of my stomach," is one typical sentence; and the latter symptom is an important one to keep in mind when we come to

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

consider the tragic circumstances of her mysterious death, for it probably furnishes the clue to the mystery. Meanwhile we remark her expression of simply joy at the news of her lover's return :

“ A person who has been long expected is, at last, to arrive this evening, apparently in very tolerable health. A courier has ridden ahead to announce him, for his carriage has broken down thirty leagues away. A post chaise has been sent to fetch him, and he will be here this evening.”

He came—and, as we have seen, gave Adrienne cause to make her tragic gesture in the theatre, in the presence of spectators who “ understood what it was about and applauded to the echo.” The incident cannot be dated; but it probably synchronised with the letter to a correspondent, who cannot be identified, in which Adrienne, expressing herself in a manner more natural to her, confessed that she had “ cried all night,” and complained that she was “ suspected,” and “ accused,” and given no opportunity of defending herself :

“ It is natural ” (she continues) “ to cry out against perfidy; and I would rather pardon it than be obliged to keep my grief and resentment under control. It is idle to tell me that that is his way of looking at things, and that he has no intention of wronging me in confounding me with the generality of women. I cannot take that view. For the ten years I have known him, he has never used such language to me, and this is not the reward which I deserve for my constant endeavours to please him and earn his good opinion. . . . It would be an easy

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

matter for me to dissipate his error; but how can I console myself for the shameful thought which inspired the calumny. He is a man who should surely know me, and who ought to love me. . . . It is in his eyes that they are trying to make me appear false and contemptible. Whatever he says, he is met with repeated asseverations of my alleged offence. Oh, my God! What is to become of me? What am I to do?"

It is a little obscure, of course, being written to some one who was assumed to be already in possession of the essential fact; and it is impossible, at this distance of time, to dot all the i's and cross all the t's. But there is no need to try to do so. The letter may mean many things; but it assuredly means among other things—the Duchesse de Bouillon. The legend, to which Scribe and Legouv   gave substance in their drama, is that the rivalry of the Duchesse de Bouillon was the cause of Adrienne's death—by poison; and that is the legend which next demands attention.

## CHAPTER VII

Alleged Attempt of the Duchesse de Bouillon to poison Adrienne Lecouvreur—Adrienne's Death—Christian Burial refused to her.

OUR situation, expressed in the concise style of stage directions, is now as follows : Adrienne Lecouvreur and the Duchesse de Bouillon in love with Maurice de Saxe ; Maurice in love with Mlle. Cartou of the Opera ; Adrienne jealous of both her rivals ; the Duchesse de Bouillon unaware of the rivalry of Mlle. Cartou, but attributing Maurice's coldness to Adrienne, whom Maurice had invited to meet her at a country house near Paris. And that brings us to our problem, which may be broken up into two separate problems :

1. Did the Duchesse de Bouillon try to poison Adrienne ?

2. Was Adrienne, in fact, poisoned, or did she die a natural death ?

The popular belief used to be that the Duchesse de Bouillon first tried to poison Adrienne and failed, and then tried a second time and succeeded. That is not, on the face of it, very probable ; for one would naturally have expected the failure of the first attempt to have been an effective warning alike to the poisoner and to her victim. So long, however, as one had nothing but popular report to go upon, it was impossible to get beyond the region of conjecture ; and even now absolute certainty cannot be established. Still, documents have recently been disinterred which

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

help towards the forming of an opinion. M. Monval has discovered, and produced, the depositions of the alleged poisoner's alleged accomplice—the Abbé Bouret. They correspond, in a very striking manner, with the irresponsible gossip of Mlle. Aissé's Letters; and it is better to go to them than to any other source for the elucidation of the mystery.

Siméon Bouret, the son of a French functionary at Metz, was no ordinary abbé. He was a boy of nineteen, and a hunchback; and there is no indication that his tonsure had any bearing upon his way of life. Having some talent as a painter of miniatures, he came to Paris to perfect himself in that art, and to practise it, living modestly in furnished lodgings. One of his acquaintances was a painter named Périgord; and this Périgord introduced him to a young man who turned out to be one of the Duchesse de Bouillon's pages. The conversation turning upon art, Bouret proposed to paint the page's portrait; and this offer was accepted. The sittings were given in the page's room at the Hôtel de Bouillon on six or seven successive mornings—the portrait being ultimately used to adorn the page's tortoise-shell snuffbox.

The portrait was shown to the Duchess, who admired it. She sent for the artist, and complimented him. Would he, she asked, care to paint her portrait too? Naturally, he replied that it would be a great honour to him to do so; and an appointment was duly made. The portrait—a miniature of the size of a coin—took rather more than a week to finish; and so far, apparently, all was accident and innocence. The sitter, however, was not proud. She conversed with the artist; and the conversation turned upon the theatre, and the actors and actresses. Did Bouret



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

know any actors or actresses, the Duchess asked, and which of them did he admire the most ?

“ I know no better actors than the Quinaults, and I think the best actresses are Mesdemoiselles Lecouvreur and Duclos ? ”

“ Are you acquainted with Mademoiselle Lecouvreur ? ”

“ I have only seen her on the stage.”

“ Then, since you don't know her, and she does not know you, I want you to do me a favour—to hand her a letter which I will dictate to you.”

The letter was duly dictated. It was a love-letter, ostensibly written by a Prince of the blood who urged Adrienne to forsake Maurice de Saxe for his sake. Soon after it was written, however, and before it was delivered, Mme. de Bouillon changed her mind. What she really wanted, she then explained, was to induce Adrienne Lecouvreur to drink a love philtre. Could Bouret manage that for her ? He said that he did not know, but that he would try :

“ Do you keep early hours ? ” asked the Duchess.

“ I generally go to bed about ten or eleven.”

“ Very well. Be at the gate of the Tuileries, near the Pont Royal, at eleven o'clock to-night. I will send some one to fetch you on my way home from the ball.”

That is our first indication that underhand work was contemplated, and that it was proposed to use Abbé Bouret as a tool. In order to understand his position in the matter, we must forget that he was an abbé, and remember only that he was a young man from the country, and infinitely the social inferior of

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

the Duchess. It is the instinct of a young man from the country, in such a case, to do as he is told, without asking questions; the instinct being reinforced by curiosity and the desire of mysterious adventure. One pictures young Bouret going to the *rendez-vous*, not quite without trepidation, but persuaded that here was his chance of seeing life and encountering experiences which would thrill his friends in the country with envy when he returned to them. Alas ! poor Siméon Bouret !

He went, at the appointed hour, to the appointed place, and masked men met him there. They took him along the Quai des Théatins to Mme. de Bouillon, whom he found sitting on the parapet, waiting for him. Two other masked men were standing about twenty yards away, and she told him to speak to them. They began by asking him whether he wanted to earn money, and could keep a secret :

“ Easily and willingly if I’m not to be asked to do anything criminal.”

“ No, no—nothing of the kind. You know the person of whom the Duchess spoke to you. All that you have to do is to obtain permission to call on her, and induce her to take certain lozenges which will cause her to become indifferent to the Comte de Saxe, and to fall in love with some one else.”

“ If that is all, there will be no difficulty in the matter.”

There, to a modern eye, the plot stands clearly revealed; but it is not so certain that young Bouret as yet understood what sort of a plot it was. As a young man from the country, only nineteen years of age, he may very well have believed in love philtres,

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

and would certainly have been slow to suspect a Duchess of harbouring criminal designs. Moreover, he was promised that his reward would be a lump sum of six thousand francs and an annuity of six hundred francs; so that he naturally preferred to believe, as long as possible, that the proposed task was one which he could conscientiously perform. Consequently, he refused to see the dots on the i's until Mme. de Bouillon herself put them there.

She did so at the next sitting for her portrait :

“ You heard what those gentlemen said to you yesterday. She is a good-for-nothing woman. We must get her out of the way—it will be a service to the State to do so, and you may be quite confident that you will get your reward.”

That hint was followed by an injunction to meet the masked men again, and not to return to the Hôtel de Bouillon until he had done what was required of him. Bouret did meet the masked men again; and the hints which he received from them were, if possible, even plainer than those which their principal had dropped. They told him that his commission admitted of no delay, and that he must not be surprised if the medicine which he administered were violent in its effects :

“ But suppose she died of it ? ”

“ Even if that should happen, you need not be alarmed. The most careful precautions will be taken. We will have a post chaise ready, and you shall, if necessary, be conveyed safely over the frontier.”

Then, at last, it was really evident to the young man from the country that the business proposed to him

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

was one in which it would be better for him not to meddle, even for the sake of cash down and an annuity to follow. He withdrew to a suburb, hoping to hear no more about it; but, at the end of a month, the emissaries hunted him out and held him to his undertaking. He temporised, kept another appointment, and then consulted his Confessor, and received sound advice—to inform the actress of the machinations against her; which he duly did, in the time-honoured style of the cloaked and hooded conspirators of melodrama :

“ MADemoiselle,

“ It will surprise you to receive a communication from a stranger, who begs you to be on the Luxembourg Terrace at half-past five to-morrow afternoon. You will there meet a person who will explain everything to you fully; and you will recognise him by this sign : an abbé who will tap his hat three times when he accosts you.”

So he wrote; and Adrienne, accompanied by two friends, met him as he requested, and was informed that she had enemies who sought an opportunity of poisoning her :

“ The threat comes from the Opera ? ”

“ No.”

“ Then it must come from the Hôtel de Bouillon.”

Bouret neither confirmed nor denied the conjecture; and Adrienne exhorted him to say nothing until she had consulted a friend who would advise her how to act. When Bouret next saw her, Maurice de Saxe was with her. Maurice questioned him at great



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

length; and it was decided that the plot should be allowed to proceed until the plotters committed themselves, and that Maurice should be kept informed of all their doings.

So it continued; the masked men, on their part, taking every precaution to cover up their tracks. Bouret was to find the packet of lozenges, of which they had spoken to him, under a particular tree in a particular avenue—he would know what to do with it. He carried it to Adrienne, who had the lozenges analysed by Geffroy, of the Académie des Sciences, who declared them “suspicious” but declined to express any more positive opinion. And, in the meantime, Bouret was arrested under a *lettre de cachet* and lodged at Saint-Lazare, where Adrienne sent him money, a change of linen, and some books to read. He was kept in prison for three months, and then released through the representations of his father, the provincial functionary. He went to see Adrienne, who warned him that he was not yet safe, but might be rearrested if he did not disappear. As a matter of fact, he was rearrested towards the end of January 1780, and was this time detained for twenty months; and, long before the end of that period, Adrienne was dead.

What was the cause of her death? It is clear, at any rate, that she was not poisoned by the Duchesse de Bouillon’s lozenges; for she did not take them. Contemporary calumny—voiced notably by Mlle. Aissé—averred that the Duchesse de Bouillon, visiting her in her dressing-room to compliment her on her performance, found another means of administering the fatal dose; but that is a very unlikely story. Adrienne, in the circumstances, would have been on her guard, and Mme. de Bouillon would have expected



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

her to be on her guard, and would have feared detection. The fact that Adrienne died of some gastric inflammation naturally seemed, at the time, to indicate poison; but Adrienne, as we know, and as her letters amply prove, had all her life been subject to gastric inflammations. There was an autopsy, and "the bowels were found to be ulcerated." Dysentery, from which she had previously suffered, is a possible diagnosis; a more probable one, perhaps, is appendicitis. The suddenness of the attack, while playing in Voltaire's *Œdipe*, would be in accordance with that view.

Our conclusion must be, therefore, that Mme. de Bouillon must be acquitted of the crime, but not of the intention to procure it; and our next question is: Why, and at whose instance, was Bouret thrown into prison and kept there for so long? The records of his various examinations show that there was practically only one charge against him: the charge of inventing a scandalous story to the detriment of Mme. de Bouillon. He repeated the story, with little variation of detail, several times. Finally he withdrew it, and apologised for it, saying that he had devised the whole comedy as a means of making Adrienne's acquaintance; and when he had said that, they let him out. The withdrawal and the apology were evidently the conditions of his release, and have, therefore, no value whatsoever as evidence. Supposing his story to have had no foundation in fact, he would have had every motive for retracting and apologising at an earlier stage of the affair. Nor can any inference be drawn from the fact that he did not repeat the story after his release; for he had had his lesson, and was scared. The suggestion that he was assassinated at the instigation of those whom he had offended

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

rests upon no proof; and it suffices to believe that he went back to the country and stayed there—convinced that Paris was no safe place for a young man of his simplicity.

That, however, was not until more than a year after Adrienne's death. We have to go back to that distressing story, and to the still more distressing story of the manner of her burial. While she was ill, all Paris seemed to hold its breath in its anxiety for news of her; when she was dying, Voltaire and Maurice de Saxe were sitting with her; but when she was dead, the curé of Saint-Sulpice and the Archbishop of Paris refused her Christian burial on the ground that she had "shown no sign of repentance for the scandals of her profession."

Nor was it Christian burial only which they refused,—they denied her admission even to the unconsecrated corner of the cemetery. Her body, without even a coffin, was bundled into a carriage, driven to a piece of waste land near the Seine, and buried in a grave hastily dug there, and filled up with quicklime—an indignity without precedent in the annals of the theatre.

No reasons were assigned for it except the desire of the police that she should be "buried with as little scandal as possible"—which seems a curious reason for causing a scandal which still echoes down the ages. The inference is difficult to resist that there was collusion between the secular and ecclesiastical authorities, and that both authorities alike were acting, not on their own motion, but in response to some influence which had been brought to bear on them. The influence was doubtless the same as that which dictated Bouret's recantation and apology. By what means it was brought to bear one cannot

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

pretend to say; but one can hardly be mistaken in tracing it to Mme. de Bouillon—her guilty conscience, and her fears that a second and more careful autopsy might be demanded, and might bring damning facts to light, or else her desire to wreak her spite on her rival's body.

She may have felt that fear even if she was innocent of Adrienne's actual death, knowing that she was suspected, not knowing whether she could safely trust her masked confederates, and desiring, above all things, that Bouret should be given no opportunity of telling his story of the drugged lozenges in open court. And so, because she had influence and wished it so, Adrienne was hurried secretly to her obscure place of sepulture—a place so obscure that it remained unknown until young d'Argental, then an old man, identified it, and raised a memorial tablet over it in 1786.

And, meanwhile, Maurice de Saxe, paying no further attention to Mme. de Bouillon, went on his way to the camp of Mühlberg, in Saxony, taking Mlle. Cartou of the Opera with him, and giving a supper-party at which that lady had the honour of sitting between the Man of Sin and the Great Frederick.

## CHAPTER VIII

Further Gallantries of Maurice de Saxe—His Relations with Marie de Verrières—And with Mme. Favart—Persecution of Mme. Favart and her Husband—Imprisonment of a suspected Rival.

It would be easy (but it would be unprofitable) to fill the remainder of this work with a chronicle of the gallantries of Maurice de Saxe. The narrative, if picturesque at first, would soon become monotonous. A glance must suffice: just enough to exhibit this hero of the ladies as he really was—devoid of sentiment and altogether unworthy of sympathy.

The leading fact to be remembered is that, when he waged war in the Low Countries, his army included a comic opera company, and his comic opera company supplied recruits for his seraglio. Musical Comedy, he maintained, kept soldiers out of mischief by providing them with a more rational amusement than card-playing on the days on which there was no fighting to be done—especially if the bulletins of victory were announced in verse from the stage. It pleased him, at times, to show his chivalry by lending his comedians to the enemy, while retaining one of the ladies of the company—but by no means always the same lady—to live at his head-quarters as his favourite. This at a time when his military reputation stood as high as that of the Duke of Marlborough at an earlier, or that of the Duke of Wellington at a later, date.

There was nothing romantic about it. Scandalous



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

is the more appropriate word; and the scandal was open and unashamed, including conduct which even the most lenient judge cannot deem worthy of "an officer and a gentleman." The unworthy relatives of abandoned women were rewarded to the detriment of the public service; while women who professed a preference for virtue, or for their husbands, did so at the risk of a persecution which one expects to see practised in such circumstances by an Oriental despot, but not by a Marshal of France. The typical cases are those of the notorious Marie de Verrières, and the famous Mme. Favart.

Marie de Verrières was really Marie Rintieu. Her daughter—who was also Maurice's daughter—was George Sand's grandmother. She herself, and her sister Geneviève, who was also, for a moment, one of Maurice's favourites, both began life as strolling players, and both rose to become the most fashionable courtesans of their age—fashionable enough to have a salon frequented by men of letters. She was not faithful to Maurice. She preferred Mme. d'Epinay's husband—who once had to take a flying leap out of her window to escape from Maurice's violence; she also preferred the poet Marmontel, on whose account Maurice ultimately threw her over. But she nevertheless made use of Maurice in the interest of her family—inducing him to place her father in charge of a military store, where he plundered the French taxpayers to such an extent that there was an outcry, and he was ejected in disgrace.

That is bad enough—and also ridiculous and unromantic enough—to satisfy any one who wants to make out a case against Maurice; but his treatment of Mme. Favart is even more to his discredit. It will be enough to outline the story in order to



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

show what power Maurice possessed, and how he abused it.

Mme. Favart was the wife of the director of one of Maurice's light opera companies in Flanders, who had begun life as a confectioner. She lived happily with her husband and wished to continue to do so. The result was that she and her husband had to take to flight in different directions—the one to escape from his attentions, and the other to escape from his vengeance. We hear of her throwing herself on the protection of the Duchesse de Chevreuse at Brussels, and of him hiding in the cellar of a hospitable curé at Strasburg. The protection of the Duchesse de Chevreuse, however, was of no avail. Maurice insisted; Mme. Favart yielded; Favart was obliged to admit that she could not help herself—that Maurice was too strong for them—that her submission was the price which Fate required them to pay for a quiet life. So ends Act I.

In Act II we find Mme. Favart established in Paris, living under Maurice's protection in the luxury which had been forced upon her; her husband indulgently permitted to come to Paris too, on the understanding that he made no attempt to see his wife. Mme. Favart, however, treated as she had been, acknowledged no obligations to her protector. Since Maurice assumed the rights of a husband, she resolved to give her husband the privileges of a lover. She made a practice of admitting him by the back door and the back stairs; and Maurice was duly deceived until some tale-bearer told him what was happening. Then he was furious and took his measures. He posted soldiers to guard the house, just as if it had been a powder magazine or a meeting-place of conspirators; with the result that, when

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

Favart next presented himself at the back door, fixed bayonets barred the way to the nuptial chamber. He had no choice but to withdraw, leaving Maurice in possession. That is the end of Act II.

Act III is concerned with Mme. Favart's attempts to escape from Maurice's protection. She could put up with him as long as she could deceive him; but his monopoly was intolerable to her. She ran away—her husband with her—to her mother-in-law's house, and there wrote to Maurice, setting forth that her relations with him were sinful, and that the time had come when she must really repent of her sins and abandon them. That was the signal for the campaign of persecution. Favart fled again to Strasburg—just in time to escape arrest under a *lettre de cachet*. Mme. Favart, for whom Maurice had obtained an engagement at the Comédie Italienne, was kept under observation; and a charge was trumped up against her, with the connivance of her drunken and necessitous father, of having forged the document purporting to convey his consent to her marriage. Over her head, too, a *lettre de cachet* hung suspended.

She wrote her husband a cheering letter, declaring that she feared nothing—that she would willingly, if need were, beg her bread with him on the highways. Then she got frightened, and fled, proposing that her husband should join her at Lunéville; and her persecutors were up and after her. They meant to arrest both wife and husband, but only succeeded in arresting the wife. She was taken to convents; first to a convent at Les Andelys, where she was treated well; then to a convent at Angers, where she was treated badly—subjected, in fact, almost to the rigours of an imprisoned criminal, albeit with such unction in the

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

application of the cruelty as the place compelled. Her arrest may be the signal for the dropping of the curtain on Act III.

The scene of Act IV is laid in the convents; the action consists of the gradual opening of Mme. Favart's eyes. At first, it seems, she really believed that her father was the author of her misfortunes; that Maurice sympathised, and was trying to help her. She wrote him pathetic letters based on that assumption; and the letters which she wrote at the same time to Favart show that she really cherished that illusion. But the illusion could not last. Maurice was so very powerful, and help was so long delayed. It was evident, even to her, that Maurice was playing a double game; so her letters grew more and more pathetic as time went on. One may presume that she had liked him a little—so many women did—even though she had only yielded to him under constraint. He certainly had professed, at one time, to be her devoted slave. So we find her, in her misery, writing thus :

“ If I have said anything which displeases you, or hurts you, I beg your pardon a thousand times. You will do me the justice, My Lord, of believing that it was not because I had no tender feeling for you. If I have wronged you—well, you know me, and know how easily I change my mind. . . . It came to seem to me a more becoming course to live with my husband and my parents than to allow myself to gratify, if I could, caprices which I might have been glad to gratify, and so dishonour my own past. You know that my conduct has been irreproachable in that respect; you ought to do me the justice of believing it. If I allowed myself to profit by your kindness and

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

generosity, I could not help it. I had to earn my living as best I could, for, as you know, I have no fortune but my talents. It would be far better to do as I have asked you to do a thousand times—to deprive me of those benefits and set me free—than to leave me in possession of them when they are of so little use to me, and persecute me as you are doing. You say that it is not you who are my persecutor; but it is you, at any rate, who are the cause of the persecution. I know none of the people about the Court. I have never done any harm to any of them; and I cannot believe them so cruel as to injure me without a motive. So there is nothing for me to do but to cry; and there is nothing which can get me out of my trouble unless it be your kindness and generosity. That is my only hope.”

A medley, one suspects, of genuine sentiments, and sentiments assumed for the purpose of melting Maurice's heart. It was not melted; but Maurice continued to play his double game, sending money and holding out promises—but keeping the door of the prison closed, while pretending that he was trying his hardest to open it. So the prisoner's letters grew more and more heart-rending :

“ I am cruelly punished for having tried to please you. I was so inexperienced in those days—I thought it hardly mattered—I thought it was permissible to women whose only means of livelihood were their talents—especially when they meant to do no injury to any one. So, in all innocence, I have ruined both my family and myself. My life is a burden to me—I wish I were dead. My soul must be screwed into my body like a joint into its socket, or I could



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

not survive. . . . All that is nothing to you, of course; but I cannot help pitying myself all the same."

And then again :

" In God's name, do not play with me any longer. If I am to have my liberty, let me have it as soon as possible. . . . Every time I hear the convent bell, I feel my heart beating, with the thought that perhaps it is some one for me. . . . Oh, My Lord, I do beg and pray you to procure my release as quickly as ever you can. It will be a true act of pity to deliver a poor prisoner who never deserved her imprisonment. I am waiting—oh, so eagerly—to get this good news from you."

Truly an amazing situation, and one provocative of sharp comment on the way in which justice was done in France in the century preceding the Revolution. To realise it, we have to remember that Maurice de Saxe stood out among French soldiers as Lord Roberts and Lord Kitchener stand out among English soldiers to-day; that Mme. Favart's position on the stage was analogous with that of whatever lady may now be the idol of the hour at the Gaiety; and that she could only have been arrested and detained by the connivance of functionaries in positions akin to those of our Lord Chamberlain and the Chief Commissioner of our Metropolitan Police. One may justly cite the case, as a further proof to be added to the many which one possesses, that the outcry of the Revolutionists against the aristocrats had a good deal of substance behind it.

At last, however, the *lettre de cachet* was cancelled,



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

and Mme. Favart was released. Whether she paid the price for her freedom which Maurice would have liked to exact, or whether Maurice relented because some other woman's charms had fascinated him, is unknown to either his biographers or hers. In either alternative, he cuts a shabbily unheroic figure; and we will leave him cutting it until his death, which took place about three months later, noting merely that the evil which he had done lived after him in the blight which he had brought upon what should have been a harmonious household.

Favart had meant to be a model husband; Mme. Favart had meant to be a model wife. But, though she had only yielded under compulsion—still she had yielded; and the result was a sort of moral degeneration, and a feeling that—even though Maurice was now out of the way—things were not quite as they had been, and never could be. If Favart forgave, he could not quite forget. The atmosphere was poisoned. The sentiment was dead which made fidelity instinctive, and its own reward. There was a *ménage-à-trois*, in which Favart's collaborator—the frivolous Abbé de Voisenon—was the third partner.

It is a sorry ending to what should have been a purely pathetic story; but we will lay the blame for it on the broad shoulders of the monstrous Marshal of France, who had torn the husband and the wife apart, and created the atmosphere in which such things were possible to persons who had no natural inclination for anything but single-minded conjugal fidelity. Happily, this sequel to Mme. Favart's story has no incidents on which it is necessary to dwell; but there is one incident which we have passed over, and to which we must return. It relates to

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

yet another *lettre de cachet* ; and the official record of it, which has been discovered among the Bastille Archives, is as follows :

January 11, 1750.

“ The man Hippolyte de Langellerie was arrested to-day by me, the undersigned officer, accompanied by the Commissary de Rochebrune, and was conducted to the cells of For L’Evêque, in virtue of the order signed by the King on the 10th of this month.

“ MEUSNIER.

“ He was released on the 12th.”

The said Langellerie was Mme. Favart’s accompanist at the time when she was at the Comédie Italienne. The motives of the arrest are set forth in a well-known manuscript found at the Bastille, bearing Meusnier’s signature :

“ At Langellerie’s house there were found several letters from the Chantilly (Madame Favart) showing the nature of the relations subsisting between them. That was all that was wanted. He only slept one night at For L’Evêque. On the following day the Marshal gave him six double louis as compensation for any annoyance which his detention might have caused.”

Whereupon M. Funck-Brentano, the historian of For L’Evêque, comments in *La Bastille des Comédiens* :

“ As for his unfaithful mistress, the terrible Marshal had her sent to the Angers Penitentiary, the convent in which it was the custom to confine wives who were unfaithful to their husbands—a wife, in this instance, unfaithful to a husband whose place Maurice de Saxe was then occupying.”

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

But that can hardly be, as any one can discover by comparing the date of Langellerie's arrest with the dates of Mme. Favart's letters. Mme. Favart was already at Angers when Langellerie paid his brief visit to For L'Evêque; and the indemnity voluntarily paid to Langellerie for his detention is strong presumptive evidence that Maurice, in fact, found nothing among his papers to justify his jealousy; for Maurice was by no means the sort of man to be needlessly generous to a successful rival, as the narrative of his attitude towards Mme. Favart's husband—and also towards M. d'Epinay—has amply demonstrated.

His suspicions, however, have brought us to For L'Evêque—the old prison now no more, in which so many eighteenth-century comedians were lodged; and For L'Evêque requires a chapter to itself.

## CHAPTER IX

For L'Eveque, the Bastille of the Comedians—Some notable Prisoners—Le Kain—Mlle. Clairon—Mme. Saint-Huberty, and many others.

A PRISON for comedians sounds odd to modern ears; but such an institution seemed natural, and almost necessary, to the French playgoers of the eighteenth century.

In theory the actors and actresses were the servants, not of the public, but of the King, who lent them to the public when he did not require them for his own diversion. But the King's servants had to behave as such, or be dealt with disciplinarily if they failed to do so. So Gentlemen of the Chamber were placed in authority over them and empowered to lock them up if they misconducted themselves, in virtue of *lettres de cachet*. An actor who "gagged," an actress who threw her part at the manager's head, a player of either sex who accepted an engagement in a foreign country—all these were liable to be marched off to prison and kept there until they abased themselves to a more docile frame of mind.

But there were prisons *and* prisons; and not every prison would serve. Actors and actresses were not important enough to be sent to Vincennes and the Bastille; but, on the other hand, they were too important to be herded with common criminals. A charming actress, in particular, could not very well be sent, for some fault of temper or caprice, to a gaol

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

in which the routine of discipline would, as at La Sapêtrière, include the shaving of her head. So For L'Evêque was selected as a mean between the two extremes, and came to be known as the Bastille of the Comedians, though a good many other people besides comedians were confined there.

Originally, as the name implies, For L'Evêque was a prison belonging to the Bishop. Episcopal jurisdiction, however, came to an end in the reign of Louis XIV; and the King then took the prison over. It was used partly as debtors' prison, and partly as a prison for persons detained under Administrative Order. This latter class included officers who had left their regiments without leave, and young men of good family whose anxious parents solicited the police to keep them out of mischief. It also, as has been said, included the comedians.

Naturally, therefore, the prison was—save for impecunious debtors—quite without horrors, or even rigours. The warders, when they went about their duties, were protected from possible violence by an escort of savage dogs; but there were practically no other means of maintaining discipline. Transference to a stricter prison was the only effective punishment available for the refractory; and those who gave no trouble were allowed to live pretty much as they liked. They could have cells furnished like boudoirs if they cared to pay for the privilege; they could have their meals sent in to them from the best restaurants, without restriction as to the number of the courses or the quantity of the wine; they could receive visitors and give parties. The rule that male prisoners must receive no lady visitors except their wives was allowed to fall into abeyance; leave of absence could be obtained for the purpose of keeping



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

important engagements; and there was practically no interference with any prisoner's proceedings, so long as there was no disorder. One reads of one prisoner who forged bank-notes in his cell, and of another who, having business relations in the world of gallantry, arranged to provide his fellow prisoners with mistresses. The lot of the prisoners, in short—always excepting the penniless—has no claim whatsoever on our tears.

There were notable persons among them—quite apart from the comedians—from time to time. The most interesting of them, perhaps, was M. de Montepan, the husband of Louis XIV's mistress. His offence was that he refused to acquiesce in his dishonour, but reminded the *Roi Soleil* of the story of David and Bathsheba; and he was only released on his giving an undertaking to make no further reference to that scriptural episode. Hardly less interesting was Lord Massereene, the Irish peer, who was imprisoned for debt. There is an interesting official report about him to the effect that he has procured false whiskers and is threatening to escape, and that his gaolers have not the least idea how to prevent him from doing so. A third prisoner was the notorious brigand Cartouche, who actually did escape. A fourth was Beaumarchais, who had stolen the affections of the mistress of the Duc de Chaulnes, and then drawn his sword on his rival. And when we come to the comedians themselves, we encounter the most illustrious names in the history of the French drama. Le Kain and Mlle. Clairon held the same supreme position on the French stage in the eighteenth century that Sir Henry Irving and Miss Ellen Terry at one time occupied with us. Both of them were sent to For L'Évêque: Le Kain for visiting Voltaire when his

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

services were required at the theatre; he and Mlle. Clairon together in circumstances which it will be worth while to relate at length.

It was in 1765. The comedian Dubois had failed to pay his doctor's bill; and the doctor came to the *foyer* to complain. The company, having heard the representations of both parties, took the doctor's side, and announced that they would no longer play with Dubois. So far, so good. The door was open, and it seemed that there was nothing for Dubois to do but to walk out of it. But Dubois had a young and beautiful daughter, who brought her charms to bear upon one of the Gentlemen of the Chamber. She coaxed him so effectively that the order came to the theatre that the piece then in rehearsal—*Le Siège de Calais*—was to be played, and that Dubois was to have a part in it. The authority of the Gentlemen of the Chamber was absolute—there could be no appeal; but it was nevertheless decided to raise the standard of revolt—and to do so with proper theatrical impressiveness.

The play was duly cast by the management, and duly advertised. Le Kain came to rehearsal, and there was a brief dialogue between him and the stage-manager :

“ Who plays the part of Mauni ? ”

“ Dubois—by order of the King.”

“ Then my part must be played by some one else.”

He turned on his heel and walked out. Molé, Brizard, and Dauberval all entered in turn, and all in turn played the same comedy. Then it was the turn of Mlle. Clairon, whose comedy was more elaborate.

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

She was very ill, she said. She had dragged herself with effort from her bed. But she knew her duty to the public, and she would play. And then, just like the others :

“ Who plays the part of Mauni ? ”

“ Dubois.”

“ In that case, I am really ill, and I am going back to bed.”

And she got into her Sedan chair, and was carried home in it.

That at the eleventh hour, when it was almost time for the curtain to be raised. There was a hurried consultation with one of the Gentlemen of the Chamber, who happened to be present. He was not the Gentleman of the Chamber whom Mlle. Dubois had coaxed, and he agreed to the substitution of another piece—*Le Joueur*—for the one announced. But the public would not have it so. Mlle. Dubois had not contented herself with coaxing a Gentleman of the Chamber. She had other friends, equally fascinated by her charms; and she had organised a party among them. She was even now in the front of the house, appealing to them to make a disturbance; and so, when the acting-manager attempted to announce the necessary change of programme, the furious cry went up :

“ Take Dauberval to prison ! ”

“ Put Clairon in the lock-up ! ”

“ And Molé with her ! ”

So the storm raged for an hour—fomented by the beautiful Mlle. Dubois, and directed by her admirers among men of fashion. The young Count of Fitz-

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

James, in particular, stood up and shook his fist, asking where was the Lieutenant of Police, and why he endured the insolence of the comedians instead of putting them under lock and key. There was nothing for it but to lower the curtain and return the money, while the Lieutenant of Police issued his order for the arrest of the ringleaders of the rebellion. Brizard and Dauberval, who were in the house, were taken straight to For L'Evêque. Garrick, who happened to be in Paris, offered to hide Le Kain and Molé in his apartment, but they preferred to surrender themselves. Mlle. Clairon was arrested in her own house, and seized the opportunity of striking a magnificent attitude, with the result that she brought upon her head a repartee which has become historic :

“ I submit to the orders of the King. All that I have is at the disposition of his Majesty—my property, my person, my life. But my honour remains intact. The King himself cannot deprive me of my honour.”

To which sentiments the polished policeman gracefully assented, adding :

*“ Là où il n'y a rien, le roi perd ses droits.”*

But Mlle. Clairon's journey to prison was nevertheless a triumphal procession; and her sojourn there was like a royal visit. The wife of the Intendant of Paris, and the Duchesses de Duras and de Villeroy enriched her cell with gifts of luxurious furniture; and all Paris came to call on her. “ There is,” writes Bachaumont, “ an amazing crowd of carriages



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

besieging the prison gate. She gives a delightful supper-party there every night, and lives in the grandest style."

Stone walls, in short, in Mlle. Clairon's case, made not a prison, but a first-class hotel. As the theatre could not get on without her, she was taken there, every night, to play—though not in *Le Siège de Calais*; and, after the play was over, she returned to her hotel-prison to entertain her friends. At the end of a fortnight, she was released on the ground that her health was suffering—whether from her detention or from her suppers. Her colleagues were detained a week or so longer; and then, as the Comédie was dropping money, they too were set at large, and the affair was settled to everybody's satisfaction. The author of *Le Siège de Calais* agreed to withdraw his piece; Dubois was persuaded to retire on a pension; and a topical poet broke out into enthusiastic lyric verse :

"À tant de courage,  
Digne d'un autre âge,  
Clairon applaudit du fond de son cœur,  
Et, clairon sonore,  
La Clairon s'honore  
D'avoir pu sauver le droit et l'honneur."

That is the leading case in the history of the Bastille of the Comedians. The net of the Gentlemen of the Chamber never again made quite so remarkable a haul; but it frequently caught individual players of the very highest distinction; and a prima donna could no more afford to defy them than could a tragédienne. Mme. Saint-Huberty, for example, was the Melba of her time; but even she was not allowed to affect a bad cold with impunity. The following letter regarding some pretence of the kind was once received by the Director of the Menus Plaisirs :



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

“ A patience more than human seems to be needed for managing the abominable business of the Opera ; but there shall be no half measures with Madame Saint-Huberty. If she refuses to sing on Tuesday next, let me know, and I will immediately send you the King’s order for her imprisonment.”

Mme. Saint-Huberty capitulated, and was not imprisoned. The eminent Sophie Arnou’d—another Melba of her period—was threatened with the same fate, and only escaped it through the intercession of Mme. Dubarry. A third Melba of her age—Mlle. Lemaure—was more defiant, and had to pay the price of independence.

The occasion was the revival of Abbé Pellegrin’s *Jephthé* in March 1735. On the night of the first production, Mlle. Lemaure had achieved a brilliant success ; but now she threw the management into confusion by announcing that she could not play, as she had a bad cold, and as M. de Harlay, Intendant of Paris, had given her an invitation to supper, which she had accepted. Maurepas, Head of the Royal Household, happened to be in the house. A message was hurriedly sent to him. He came behind, and the following dialogue ensued :

“ Now, miss, are you going to sing to-night or not ? ”

“ No, I am not going to sing to-night, and neither you nor anybody else shall make me.”

“ Very well, miss. Here is your ticket for For L’Evêque.”

And M. Maurepas filled up the blank *lettre de cachet*, and the prima donna was, there and then, conducted

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

to prison in her theatrical attire. The admirer who had hoped to be her host was powerless to protect her. The most that he could do was to accompany her to the prison gate; and the feelings of the prima donna were so wounded by her treatment that she declared her intention of renouncing the theatre and taking the veil. She did, in fact, after her release, go so far as to arrange for her reception at the Convent of the Precious Blood; but she changed her mind, and returned to the scene of her triumphs. "Evidently the For L'Evêque lozenges are good for colds," was the pleasant comment of the humorists.

A third case worth relating was that of a lady who adorned the boards of the Opéra Comique—a lady whose status might be compared to that of Miss Lily Elsie or Miss Gertie Miller, but whose conception of good taste was, one may hope, peculiar to herself. It was her playful habit, at rehearsals, to substitute for some of the author's lines an extremely indecorous couplet of her own composition. The stage-manager let it pass on her promising to adhere strictly to the text "on the night"; but, when the night came, the high-spirited young woman quite forgot to keep her promise. The effect, as her elocution was good and clear, was like the explosion of a bomb. Some of the fashionable ladies in the stalls fainted; others ran from the house as if it were on fire; while the vulgar people in the gallery uproariously encored the verse.

The singer looked round with an air of naïve innocence, as if she wondered what all the fuss was about; but she was very quickly informed. When she made her next exit, she found a police-officer waiting for her at the wings. "This way, madam, if you please," he said; and the way led to the gates of For L'Evêque. One reads in the *Anecdotes Dramatiques*,

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

from which the story is taken, that not only the vulgar people in the gallery, but also a large proportion of the gentlemen in the stalls escorted the lady to her destination, cheering her as the heroine of the hour

A fourth case was that of Mlle. Laguerre of the Opera, notorious for having ruined the Duc de Bouillon by her extravagance. "A beautiful voice, a passably pretty face, and a disreputable character," is the phrase in which a contemporary sums her up. She appeared in Piccini's *Iphigeneia in Tauris* in a state of intoxication, unable to stand upright without clutching at the supers for support. "It was not *Iphigeneia in Tauris* but *Iphigeneia in Champagne*," said Sophie Arnould sarcastically; and the gates of For L'Evêque were instantly opened for her. She did not stay there long, however, for the incompetence of her understudies caused the public to clamour for her release; and prison life does not seem to have imposed any check on her convivial habits. "It is incredible," writes a contemporary, "how much excellent wine of every kind was consumed at For L'Evêque during her visit. The gaolers were very sorry indeed to lose their brilliant boarder"—a fact which throws an interesting light upon the relations between gaolers and prisoners in this interesting house of detention.

Those are the major cases; and the name of the minor cases is legion; and the offences involved in them are infinitely various. We may run lightly through a portion of the list.

The first name on the list is that of the comedian Moligny—a terrible fire-eater, who quarrelled with a cloth merchant. There were ladies in the case—and also glasses of wine. The cloth merchant called the comedian a "mummer"; and the comedian threw

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

a glass of wine in the cloth merchant's face, and threatened, in the presence of the ladies, to throw the cloth merchant himself out of the window. His case was quickly succeeded by that of the comedian Armand, who had eloped with a popular actress and refused to say where he had hidden her. He was so proud of his exploit that he did not scruple to refer to it on the stage in an improvised stanza added to a song which had been encored":

"Si l'amour d'un trait' charmant  
Vous a fait blessure :  
Prenez pour soulagement  
Un bon gaillard comme Armand,  
La bonne aventure  
O gué !  
La bonne aventure."

The public, it is said, entered into the spirit of the thing, and cheered Armand to the echo.

Next comes the case of Artus, the Opéra Comique dancer, arrested for insulting the Marquis de Foix, who, he said, had hissed his performance: "taken to For L'Evêque," says the official record, "as an example, to show other dancers the respect which they owe to the public in general and to persons of distinction in particular." Then there was Rebours, the dancer, who threw a cracker into the stalls for the purpose of frightening the ladies; then Pantalon, who allowed his charming daughter to join the Court ballet of the King of Prussia; then Florent and Feu'llade, who forgot to pay their bill at the tavern; and after them: Noverre, who tried to recruit ballet-girls for Garrick; Saulnier, the dancer, who boxed the stage-carpenter's ears; Morissot, who threatened to kick the sentinel on duty down the stairs; Mlle.



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

Chapotin, who refused to come to rehearsals unless she were paid for doing so; Mme. Molé, who kept the stage waiting for three-quarters of an hour in the King's private theatre at Marly; and finally, the young Vestris, the son of the Vestris styled "*Le Dieu de la Danse*," who replied with insolence to some reprimand administered by M. de Vismes, the Opera Director :

"You don't seem to know, M. Vestris, to whom you are speaking."

"On the contrary, sir, I know perfectly well that I am speaking to the man who makes his living by exploiting my talents."

Whereupon the great man was marched off under the eyes of his greater father, who speeded him on his way with words of encouragement :

"Go, my son ! This should be the proudest day of your life. Drive to your prison in my carriage, and ask for the apartment once occupied by my friend the King of Poland.<sup>1</sup> Tell them that I will pay their charges, whatever they may be."

As no doubt he did. But, a little later, Vestris had to pay yet another visit to the prison, on quite a different errand. He had caused Mlle. Dorival, the prima ballerina assoluta, to be sent there, not for any neglect of her duties, but for a personal affront to himself. She had told him to go to ——, a destination

<sup>1</sup> Poniatowski, who, before his election to the Polish throne, had been a prisoner for debt.



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

which she specified; and the audience, deprived of their *pas seul*, took the lady's part, and insisted that Vestris should go to For L'Evêque and fetch her out. He drove off and found her entertaining a merry company of her admirers at supper :

"Mademoiselle," said Vestris, "you are free. They are eagerly awaiting you at the theatre."

"Indeed, sir! Are they waiting for me at the theatre? Will you be so kind as to go and tell them that I am very comfortable where I am."

"Mademoiselle, I implore you."

And the condition was made that the God of the Dance should send out for a fresh supply of champagne for the party before his prima ballerina assoluta would consent to return to the Opera, where she was at last received with a tremendous tornado of applause.

And so forth; for there is no space for further stories. Those told suffice to show that imprisonment at For L'Evêque, though an indignity in theory, was hardly in practice an inconvenience. Owing to the difficulty of replacing them, the servants of the public were the masters of the situation. Their disappearance, even for a few days, from the scene of their labours eclipsed the gaiety of Paris in a way in which the disappearance of an author, like Voltaire or Diderot, could not eclipse it, and the period of their detention seldom exceeded a few days, and never exceeded a month; with the result that rhetoricians bent upon denouncing the obnoxious system of *lettres de cachet* have generally gone to other prisons than the Bastille of the Comedians for illustrations of its cruelty.

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

That system, however, continued, as has been said, to be applied to comedians until almost the eve of the Revolution; and the prison in which they made their punishments farcical by their riotous habits was not pulled down until 1783.

## CHAPTER X

Mlle. Clairon compared with Mrs. Siddons—Her humble Origin—The Discovery of her Talents—Her Career at Rouen and in Flanders—Her Influential Protectors—Her Removal to Paris—Her Pose as a Dragon of Virtue—List, probably incomplete, of her Twenty-two Lovers.

As the name of Adrienne Lecouvreur shines in the first quarter of the eighteenth century, so that of Hippolyte Clairon stands out a little later. We have met her already as a queen in prison, holding her Court at For L'Evêque; we shall meet her in a moment as the left-handed queen of a minute German Principality; our immediate task is to contemplate her grandeur in the theatre.

Her closest English analogue would perhaps be Mrs. Siddons, though she resembles Mrs. Siddons only as an artist, and not in her way of life. The dignity of Mrs. Siddons, of course, was the dignity of the British Matron. She walked the stage, and went through the world, as one whose chief aim was to show to what sublime heights a British Matron of genius might rise without infidelity to any one of the virtues which British Matronhood implies. There was an awe-inspiring intensity in her domesticated magnificence which made it almost an act of piety and public worship to applaud her. Mlle. Clairon never struck—and never tried to strike—that note; but the effect was much the same—the note which she did strike had a very similar ring.

Mlle. Clairon, that is to say, like Mrs. Siddons,

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

arrived at art by the road of artificiality, and was as obviously a tragedy-queen in private life as on the stage. The attitude which we saw her strike when the polished policeman proposed to conduct her to prison was distinctly a Siddons attitude, though Mrs. Siddons, of course, would never have laid herself open to the polished policeman's repartee. One imagines that she addressed the policeman in Alexandrines, just as Mrs. Siddons, on a memorable occasion, addressed the publican's pot-boy in blank verse, saying :

“ You've brought me porter, boy,—I asked for beer.”

It is related, at any rate, that she complained of stomach-aches, and colds in the head, in the heart-rending accents of a Greek heroine about to be immolated for her country's cause.

In that, of course, she was the absolute antithesis of Adrienne Lecouvreur—and also of her great contemporary and rival, Mlle. Dumesnil. They, when staginess was the fashion, triumphed by a return to nature; she, when naturalness was the fashion, by a return to art. Her triumph was unquestionably greater than theirs; but that fact warrants no inference as to the superiority of her method. The battle was only in appearance a battle between methods—in reality it was a conflict between personalities. Mlle. Clairon's methods appeared to be the better because her personality was the stronger. She imposed her personality on the playgoers of her time as Mlle. Dumesnil could not. Consequently she is now remembered, whereas Mlle. Dumesnil is forgotten, though she arrived at her pinnacle of glory from beginnings as humble as one can conceive.

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

She was born, she says in her *Memoirs*, "in the unhappy class which the laws of public opinion used formerly to treat as having no civic existence." That is to say, she was illegitimate; her father being a sergeant in the garrison town of Condé, and her mother a seamstress there. Her name, which was Scanapiecq, has a queer and vulgar ring. Her father took no interest in her; and her apparent destiny was to earn her living, as her mother did, by hemming sheets, tablecloths and underlinen; but she discovered her true talents and inclinations in circumstances which have often been related.

Her mother, in pursuit of her trade as a needlewoman, had moved to Paris. The child, now twelve years of age, was lazy, and, as a punishment for her laziness, was locked up in an empty room. The room happened to overlook a room in another house in which Mlle. Dangeville, of the Comédie Française, was taking a dancing lesson. That was her first revelation of the graces of life, and of the theatre as the scene in which they might be realised and displayed. She made a habit of frequenting the empty room at the hours when the actress practised her dancing. Instinctively she came to imitate her graceful movements; and at last she persuaded a friend to treat her to a visit to the theatre. On her return, she astonished all the inhabitants of her slum by giving a wonderful imitation of the entire performance.

A girl who can do that will not be kept off the stage if plain needle-work is the only alternative offered to her; nor is there any reason why she should be. What happened in this case was that Mother Scanapiecq talked of her child's ambitions to a lady at whose house she did plain sewing; that the lady



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

invited an actor to hear the infant prodigy declaim; that the actor said that she "would do"; that teachers were provided for her; that she made a first appearance at the Comédie Italienne in January 1736; that, being too young to succeed there, she took, at the age of fourteen, an engagement at the theatre at Rouen, where she and her mother settled. Her salary was one hundred pistoles a year, and she was to be of "general utility," as actress, singer and ballet-dancer; while her mother, ceasing to be a needle-woman, obtained employment in the box-office.

It would be a hopeless task to seek to know the exact truth concerning her adventures there, or at Caen, Le Havre, Lille, Ghent, and the other towns visited by the company to which she was attached. There is a libellous Life of her from the pen of a theatrical colleague entitled *Histoire de Mlle. Cronel dite Frétillon, Actrice de la Comédie de Rouen, Écrite par elle-même*; but the statements contained in it are contradicted in her own authentic *Memoirs*; while those *Memoirs* are themselves at variance, in several particulars, with the reports of the provincial police. The net impression left by a comparison of the documents is that she lived rather scandalously; but that the scandals mattered comparatively little because her heart was not in them—because she had great gifts, and took great pains, and was always seriously an artist.

An artist and also an *arriviste*: one who took long views, and would rather be helped up the Hill of Difficulty by a lover than settle down comfortably on its lower slopes with a husband. That, at all events, is what one deduces from her own story of her mother's attempts to marry her to a provincial comedian:

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

“ My mother’s orders,” she says, “ and her violence—for she went so far as to point a pistol at my head in order to obtain my consent—convinced me that I needed a protector who, without needing to set the law in motion, would be able to keep those about me in check, and defend me.”

So she acted as she was convinced that she ought to act—“ without love,” she says, “ without desire . . . making the sole condition that I should be saved from the necessity of marrying.” She never, say the *Memoirs*, regretted her decision, and the incident was one about which she frequently talked to her friends, without shame or scruple. One does not know whether she told them—what she neglects to tell her readers—that a single protector did not suffice; that her protection was, in fact, undertaken by a Triple Alliance—the allied Powers being Colonel the Comte de Bergheic, Lieutenant-Colonel the Chevalier de By, and Major Desplaces. That, however, is the addition to the story supplied by the Reports of the Police, which comment :

“ At first people were alarmed to see three rival warriors disputing for a young woman’s heart; but there is no need to be excited—everything will pass off quietly. The Clairon is a girl who knows how to arrange such matters, and is quite capable of entertaining half a dozen suitors. So there is no disturbance of order, and everybody is satisfied.”

It was an anticipation of the actress’s future; and it anticipated that future in more ways than one. Mlle. Clairon’s destiny was to have an exceptionally

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

long list of lovers—and to attach exceptionally little importance to them. Her genius largely consisted, as the genius of an actress must, in her charm and her power to please; but she also had more than her share of the hardness and egoism of genius. Her first aim was always to succeed in her art; her second to live in splendour and luxury; her third to enjoy. Lovers were means to those ends. The importance which she attached to her own personality was so great that their personalities hardly counted—as long, at all events, as she was in the plenitude of her powers and beauty.

Her *Memoirs* tell us that, while she was at Ghent, the third Duke of Marlborough laid his fortune at her feet, and that she rejected his offer because all Englishmen were “odious” to her. It is not to be supposed that the Duke’s intentions were as honourable as the comedian’s; and the conditions attached to his offer were probably incompatible with the quest of glory on the boards. Mlle. Clairon, taking long views, looked upon such offers as an embellishment of theatrical renown, but not as a substitute therefor. So she ran away from Ghent to Dunkirk, and then—“the Governor of that town received an order from the King to send me to Paris to sing in the Opera.” She went there, and made her *début* in the rôle of Venus in *Hesione*. A few months later, the King gave a further order for her transference to the Comédie Française.

It sounds simple; and no doubt it can be simply explained. “Influence” had pulled the wires: first the influence of the provincial protectors, and then the influence of other protectors whose sympathy was enlisted in the capital. The protectors may or may

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

not have understood that they were affording a signal opportunity to a conspicuous talent. Most likely their chief aim was to place their *protégée* in a position in which she could practise gallantry, unimpeded by the police, according to the customs of the times. But the opportunity was none the less there, and Mlle. Clairon took it, and made the most of it.

She was a clever woman as well as a gifted tragédienne. Somehow or other, she had educated herself; and she had social as well as theatrical ambitions. She understood the importance of prestige; she realised that the dissolute must be dignified as well as dissolute if they aspire to make a great social impression, and that a grand manner is the most efficacious of all cloaks for covering up the laxities of a loose life. So she quickly adapted her bearing to her new status, and lost no time in announcing that she expected her levities to be taken seriously, and would not have them made the theme of her companions' jests. Some of them, in allusion to the libellous pamphlet above mentioned, presumed to address her playfully as Frétillon; but she administered a stern rebuke. "If any lady dares to call me Frétillon again," she said, "I'll give her the soundest smack in the face that she ever had in her life."

That was, as it were, the manifesto of the coming Star: the first intimation of the grand manner, which was to acquire a more polished grandeur as the years rolled on. Its assumption was the more necessary because there was a cabal at the Comédie Française to exclude the neophyte from that theatre on the ground that she was not sufficiently virtuous



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

to be admitted to so select a company. The respectability of the ladies of that company, however, was only relative, as those in high places were aware; and the pamphlets with which they bombarded her consequently failed of their effect. The First Gentleman of the Chamber duly signed the order for her admission. She was to be admitted at once, and she was to choose her own parts—"in order that we may be able to judge of her talents as an actress." So omnipotent was "influence" in the theatrical world at that date.

The part which Mlle. Clairon chose was that of *Phèdre*. It was Mlle. Dumesnil's great part; and she played it at least as well as Mlle. Dumesnil, who was some ten years her senior. She did equally well in *Zénobie*, and *Ariane*, and in Crébillon's *Electre*; and her position became at once, and was long to continue, secure and unassailable. Mlle. Dumesnil was her only possible rival; and the general opinion was that she excelled Mlle. Dumesnil. Socially, too, she cut a figure which Mlle. Dumesnil hardly tried to cut. Ladies of the highest rank sought her and made much of her, just as they had sought and made much of Adrienne Lecouvreur; and she knew as well as Adrienne—and perhaps even better—how to comport herself, not as a hanger-on, grateful for crumbs of condescension, but as an equal potentate who, in receiving their visits, bestowed quite as great a favour as she accepted.

And so, of course, "influence" was a ladder which she could afford to kick away almost as soon as she had climbed it. Influence had done its work in the twinkling of an eye so well that there was no possibility of undoing it. Mlle. Clairon needed no further



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

help from any man, but was free to live her own life as she chose; and a remarkable passage in her *Memoirs* gives us her own statement as to the way in which she chose to live it :

“My talent, my personality, and my affability caused so many men to throw themselves at my feet, that it was impossible for a heart so susceptible as mine to be proof against the most seductive of passions, and immune to the charm of love. . . . Love is a necessity of my nature. I have satisfied that necessity, but not in a fashion for which I need blush. I defy any one to point to any shameful bargain that I have concluded, to any man who has paid me for my favours, to any wife or any father who has cause to complain of me. No woman of my acquaintance can reproach me with having listened to the addresses of her lover; no man of my acquaintance can accuse me of having deceived him. I have never encouraged excesses, or neglect of duties, or disorderly conduct of business. To please me men have had to be virtuous as well as amiable. No child born outside the pale of morality and the law can make me blush for its existence. Over and over again, I have had the opportunity of becoming a great lady, legitimately wedded. For fifteen years I resisted the prayers and entreaties and tears of a most fascinating man who is very dear to me, in order that I might not deviate from the path of honour and duty.”

It is the confession, in short, of a dragon of virtue—though one who insists upon defining virtue for herself. The lady who maps it has got a long way, not only from the little Frétilion, but also from the

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

*débutante* who threatened to slap the face of any lady who dared to call her Frétillon. She has been in the meantime, as we shall see in a moment, the left-handed consort of a Margrave. Consequently she has learnt to talk of these matters in the grand style of one to the manner born. But she has also been, as we shall also see in a moment, a great many other things besides the left-handed consort of a Margrave; and the most effective comment on her high-minded professions of comparative virtue and disinterested satisfaction of imperious desires will be the compilation of a little list of men associated with her in that art of love which she described as “a necessity of my nature”:

M. de la Popelinière.  
The Prince de Soubise.  
The Duc de Luxembourg.  
The Duc de Bouteville.  
The Marquis de Bissy.  
The Président de Rieux.  
The Baron de Kervert.  
The Comte de Brotok.  
The Actor Grandval.  
The Baron de Besenval.  
The Prince de Monaco.  
M. d'Hugues de Giversac.  
The Marquis de Cindré.  
M. de Jaucourt.  
The Marquis de Thibouville.  
Marmontel.  
The Bailli de Fleury.  
M. de Villeguillon.  
The Marquis de Ximenes.

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

The Marquis de Bauffremont.

The Marquis de Rochechouart.

The Comte de Valbelle d'Oraison.

A grand total, if any one will take the trouble to count, of twenty-two !

## CHAPTER XI

Anecdotes of Mlle. Clairon and her Lovers—How she enriched herself at their Expense—Her Relative Fidelity to the Comte de Valbelle—Correspondence closing that Liaison.

THE list printed at the end of the last chapter may or may not be complete. It is, at any rate, as difficult to remember as a list of the Kings of Israel and Judah, and long enough to excuse the narrator from attempting to thread the names together in a connected story. It will suffice to pause for a brief moment, and turn the searchlight of fact on Mlle. Clairon's pose as the Mrs. Grundy of the *demi-monde*. The information, as is usual in these cases, is derived from the reports of the secret agents of the Lieutenant of Police.

M. le Cindré, we gather from this course, gave Mlle. Clairon "two thousand livres of which she stood in pressing need," and also a country house which he furnished for her in luxurious style. Paying her a surprise visit one day, he discovered M. de Jaucourt taking his place as host; so he withdrew, without making his presence known, and sent an upholsterer to dismantle the house and remove the furniture.

The Marquis de Ximenes, we learn from the same authority, began his suit in the belief that Mlle. Clairon's heart could be melted to tenderness with sonnets. Discovering his mistake, he changed his plans and wooed her with a Périgord pie—the six truffles in the pie being six rouleaus of fifty louis. Then she smiled on him, and permitted him to sell

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

his property in Champagne, and lay the price at her feet. She accepted the donation, but spoke contemptuously of the personal appearance of the donor, with the result that the acquaintance ceased abruptly and for ever.

One may add the story of the Prince de Monaco. "She is daily expecting the arrival of the prince and his money," says the police report; and then follows an account of a complication caused by "a foreigner" introduced by "a woman called Caron, formerly an *entremetteuse*"—and still disposed, it would seem, to follow that obnoxious calling. The foreigner did not come empty-handed, but presented "chocolate and champagne and a service of porcelain encrusted with gold," and made "an advantageous proposal." The actress informed the Prince of the proposal, and he understood what was expected of him. Let her return the gifts, he said—she would have no reason to regret the gesture; but that was more than Mlle. Clairon could do. She had already taken time by the forelock, and converted the presents into cash.

Those are the most typical stories, though there are many others of similar tone and tendency. The inference which they all suggest is that, whatever virtues Mlle. Clairon may have acquired by the time she sat down to praise herself in her old age, disinterestedness was not her normal attribute in her earlier years. On the contrary, she passed through a predatory period, knowing her value and exacting her price—not only from aristocrats and plutocrats, but also from those of her theatrical comrades who sought her smiles. We read, in those invaluable police reports, not only of a nobleman whom a few weeks of her society left without a coat to his back, but also



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

of an actor, the comedian Grandval, whose colleagues organised a benefit to recoup him for the ruinous expenditure which his enjoyment of her favours had entailed.

Among the lovers of the predatory period, indeed, Marmontel alone appears to have cherished a really grateful recollection of her kindness. She had not only volunteered to console him for the loss of a mistress—asking if there really was no more than one woman in the world who could be lovely in his eyes—telling him that “this heart must be occupied, must be filled”—but had taken a great deal of trouble to make his plays succeed; so that he had much to be grateful for. But he also had much to forgive, as he admits, even in the act of praising her :

“While she loved” (he exclaims) “no one loved more tenderly, more passionately nor more faithfully. . . . I left her charming; charming and yet more charming I found her on my return. What a pity that so seductive a character should be so fickle, and that, with so much sincerity, nay fidelity in her attachments, she should have so little constancy!”

That is how he introduces the story of his supersession by the Bailli de Fleury; and then he harks back and tells us, most genially, how, even on him, though he was a poor man, Mlle. Clairon peremptorily levied a contribution :

“I recollect a feature of that frank and sincere friendship that reigned between us, which ought not to escape me.

“Mlle. Clairon was neither rich nor economical. She often wanted money. She said to me, one day,

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

‘I want twelve louis. Have you got them?’  
‘No, indeed I have not.’ ‘Then try and get them for me, and bring them to me this evening in my dressing-room.’ I instantly began my search.”

Decidedly the woman of whom such stories are told cannot be classed with sympathetic characters; and Marmontel is the only one of her chroniclers who even makes a pretence of presenting her as sympathetic. She must, of course, have been a mistress of the art of making herself agreeable when she chose. She cannot have carried the terrifying air of a tragedy-queen as far into private life as Mrs. Siddons, of whom Sydney Smith said that it would be as impossible for him to fall in love with her as to fall in love with the Pyramid of Cheops. The ardour of her temperament prevented her from giving that impression. But her charm was artificial, not natural; dependent not upon character, but upon manner. She seldom troubled to exercise it, and still more seldom troubled to keep it up for any length of time. Whence it followed that, though she squandered many protectors’ fortunes, she broke no protectors’ hearts; and also that, though she was the great glory of her theatre, she was exceedingly unpopular thereat.

In the eyes of her fellow artists, indeed, her one outstanding quality was her insufferable arrogance. Her bearing towards the greatest and the least of them was always that of Omnipotence towards black beetles. She told Le Kain, before the assembled company, that his heart was as black as his face was ugly. Timid Mlle. Dangeville fled from the stage to avoid the obligation of meeting her. Nor had she any respect for the public, for dramatic authors, or

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

for royalty. Almost every dramatist of her time, except Voltaire, complained that she insulted him. She presumed to throw silver coins into the pit at a gala performance, with the King in the royal box, in order to provoke the cry : " Vive le Roi et Mlle. Clairon ! " She bade the world take notice that she was a much greater personage than the Pompadour. " Madame de Pompadour," she said, " owes her position to accident. I have acquired mine by genius."

In some respects, no doubt, the theatre derived advantage from this immeasurable pride. Mlle. Clairon was the champion of its dignity because its dignity involved her own. Her sense of her incalculable superiority to the rest of the world qualified her to be the spokeswoman of the theatre in its disputes with the Gentlemen of the Chamber, and, in particular, to vindicate the claims of the servants of the King to receive the sacraments of the Church. Those sacraments were necessary, not so much to her spiritual sustenance as to her self-respect. To receive them, she felt, would at once set the seal on her importance and lift her profession out of the mud. Her exclusion from them was one of the reasons given for her retirement from the stage, though there were other reasons also : indifferent health, and the affront put upon her by her imprisonment at For L'Evêque.

The company, none the less, were glad to see her go. Her zeal for their religious privileges as a corporation did not compensate them for her insolence to them as individuals. Moreover, she insulted them collectively as well as individually. " It is true," she said, when they remonstrated with her for neglecting her duties, " that I play but seldom ; but a single one of my performances suffices to earn your living

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

for a month.” It may have been true; but those in whose face she flaunted the truth naturally felt that they would rather lose money than be treated as the objects of her condescending benevolence. So she took her pension and withdrew, leaving behind her the impression of the least sympathetic of all the actresses. Her *Memoirs*, written so long afterwards, were an attempt—though not a very successful attempt—to build a Clairon Legend: a legend of a Clairon who had not only been exceptionally gifted, but also exceptionally disinterested and sentimental.

It may be that, as the years advanced, she felt the need, not only of being sentimental, but also of believing that she had always been so—a not uncommon characteristic of the old age of the selfish who find themselves left alone with their selfishness. It is presumable, too, that the requirements of her dignity were other in her age than in her youth. The young can find gratification in the thought that the price of their favours is high, and the competition for them keen. The elderly wish to remove themselves from the class in which the triumphs of vanity depend solely upon such achievements, and seek for sentimental continuity in their memories of a career which might seem to the casual observer to have been composed exclusively of episodic caprices and intrigues.

Some ambition of that kind evidently colours Mlle. Clairon's *Memoirs*. She wants to forget—she is almost able to forget—her predatory performances. She wants to lose the recollections of the liaisons which only lasted for a few weeks in the memory of a liaison which endured for nineteen years: to dwell upon the thought that she might have been a countess



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

if she had liked—that she took a motherly interest in one of the most promising of the young actors of the rising theatrical generation—that a Margrave installed her in his Margravate as his left-handed Margravine. Ennobling memories these, she felt, on a higher plane than gallantry: a fitting prelude to her final friendship—unrecorded by her previous biographers—with his Excellency the Swedish Ambassador, the unhappy husband of Mme. de Staël.

The lover who would have made her a countess if she had wished it was the Comte de Valbelle, seven years her junior—the handsomest man in Provence—and also, incidentally, the richest. The project of marriage came near to realisation in 1759, when Mlle. Clairon was invited, through the kind offices of her friend Princess Galitzin, to settle in St. Petersburg. The Russian Government, informed of her intimacy with M. de Valbelle, suggested that the situation should be regularised, and offered the bridegroom a Russian title, an adequate income, and a house to live in. The proposal was first entertained, but then declined—one does not know exactly why. Mlle. Clairon's story is that her lover was willing, but that she, on her part, feared the reproaches of his family; but that explanation implies a delicacy too nearly allied to humility to be credible in her case. It is more likely that she doubted his fidelity, and had but an imperfect confidence in her own.

Both doubts, at any rate, were justified by the course of events. The fidelity, on both sides, was of a gradually diminishing strictness; and the course of true love was disturbed by sordid questions of money—the rights of which it is impossible to determine. The lover, in spite of his great wealth, got into difficulties, which may or may not have been



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

partially due to the actress's extravagance. The actress was moved to sarcasm by his embarrassments, and wrote a disagreeable letter to the effect that she was not dependent on his munificence, but, on the contrary, would willingly give him fifty louis if that sum would be of any service to him. It appears that he did actually borrow from her—on good security, at five per cent.—and shortly afterwards received a haughty intimation, worthy of a complete letter-writer, that all was over between them for evermore.

For the actress had "heard things." She had heard of "pretty girls" who paid her lover surreptitious visits in his park. Consequently she could not believe in his renewed protestations of affection. "My heart," she wrote, "is the most tender in the world, and you have only left it the painful choice between indignation and indifference"; and she proceeded to announce her own future programme, in the tone of one who, condemned to suffer, will nevertheless be strong—and will, at the same time, do her best to prove her gratitude for the consolation which a good man has offered her :

"Whatever course you take, you and I are separated for ever. My age and infirmities, my deep sense of the wrong which you have done me, the malice of mankind and the severity of the weather have reduced me to the last extremity of pain and weakness. I doubt if I shall ever recover. If, contrary to my expectation, my life should be prolonged, it is to the Margrave of Anspach that it will be consecrated."

And she goes on, in the approved style of the complete letter-writer, to assure her deposed lover of the continuance of her "solid friendship"—to

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

say that she freely forgives him for the grief which he has caused her—and to beg that her memory may be cherished. “The tears,” she concludes, “prevent me from reading what I have written. Farewell, Valbelle !”

So they parted; and Valbelle died a bachelor—though it is by no means clear that he remained single for Mlle. Clairon’s sake. She was one of many ladies mentioned in his will, which bequeathed her an annuity of four thousand francs; and it is said that a statue of her by Houdon always had a place in the garden of his château. The château was one of those plundered and destroyed during the revolutionary fury; and the statue was a part of the plunder. It is said that it was mistaken for a statue of Mary Magdalene, and that many pious pilgrims and worshippers bowed before it in a shrine of the Chartreuse de Montrieux.

And the actress who had posed for the statue was, meanwhile, pursuing her career of fascination at the Court of the Margrave of Anspach—and, at the same time, “forming” that promising young actor Larive, and writing him remarkable letters of motherly advice.

## CHAPTER XII

Mlle. Clairon's Affection for the Actor Larive—Her cynical Advice to him as to the Conduct of his Life—Her Distress at his Marriage—She consents to become the Left-handed Consort of the Margrave of Anspach.

LARIVE was Mlle. Clairon's favourite pupil at a School of Dramatic Art which she opened on her retirement from the stage.

Not all the pupils had reason to love their preceptress; and the story of the one who had the greatest reason to complain of her methods of maintaining discipline in her Academy may be borrowed from Edmund de Goncourt's Life :

“ His age ” (we read) “ was only sixteen. He was as pretty a boy as could be; she had christened him *L'Amour*, and he was never called by any other name. But *L'Amour* took it into his head to seek lessons other than dramatic from a professor other than Mlle. Clairon; and she, it is said, in a fit of jealousy, turned *L'Amour* out of her house, in the condition of nudity in which the little god of antiquity is commonly represented by the painters. His adventure was much talked about among actresses and other women addicted to gallantry in the summer of 1767.”

As a rule, one imagines, such scandals are unfavourable to the reputation, and detrimental to the

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

prospects of Schools of Dramatic Art; but this particular scandal did not prevent Mlle. Clairon's Academy from flourishing. One of the pupils to whom she handed on the torch was Mlle. Raucourt, who was to pass it, in her turn, to Mlle. George, and thus to be the link between the theatrical glories of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Of the others Larive—a very sound, though not an inspired actor—was the most noteworthy. She corresponded with him for a long time—not on theatrical matters only—when he was playing, in and about 1772, at Brussels and Lyon; and the letters illuminate her mind and character.

She does not pose in them; and as she was really fond of Larive, they show her at her best—sincere and sympathetic, albeit with a certain *arrière-pensée*, which flashes out at last. As in the past she has taught him how to act, so now she aspires to teach him how to dress—and even how to live; and, on the whole, she finds him teachable and grateful. He sends her money to invest for him—and there is no breach of trust. He asks her to choose him a coat of many colours; and she takes a great deal of trouble, discussing materials and trimmings at length, and insisting with laudable emphasis that new coats are preferable to second-hand ones. He tells her of the distinguished acquaintances that he is making; and she mingles her congratulations with good advice as to his deportment, taking care to point out the difference between vanity and dignity. He conveys a message to her, insufficiently respectful, one infers, from a great lady who has taken notice of him; and she defends her dignity in a passage which throws valuable light upon the social position of actresses at the time:

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

“As I have not the honour of being acquainted with the Princess of Starenberg, and as my attachment to you may have set tongues wagging, and as a grisette like myself is always a nobody in a great lady’s eyes, I am not surprised to hear that people expect to see me make myself ridiculous. Virtuous conduct, intelligence, and nobility of soul, unless displayed in conjunction with a title, are mere chimeras in the eyes of the aristocracy. They would refuse one the common rights of humanity if they dared. Let us pity them, for that is all that they deserve. To be angry would be foolish. If we want to console ourselves for our insignificance, we have only to open the pages of history, where we can always be sure of finding the most illustrious names sullied by the most shameful vices and the most atrocious crimes.”

And then, descending from the general to the particular :

“When people tell you that they hope to see me at Brussels, I beg you to bear in mind that they imagine that their flattery turns my head, and that I do not wish them to be under any such impression. If I had any idea of performing in public for money, it would not be worth my while to go to Brussels for the purpose. I can do that here at any time; and there is nothing in my record to indicate that I am the sort of person who runs about looking for compliments. Anything that may have been said to the contrary is impertinent nonsense. Pray bear that in mind, and comport yourself accordingly.”

The bitterness and the pride of that outburst are



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

equally instructive, showing how difficult it then was—as perhaps it still is—for an actress to feel socially sure of herself, even when her genius is universally acclaimed, and ladies of rank accept and return her invitations to supper. There still remains at the back of her brain the haunting fear that they regard her not as an equal, but as a *grisette*: a *grisette* of genius, no doubt, but still a *grisette*—a creature whom they honour by their patronage, and whom it is always permissible to them to despise. The fear, at any rate, was clearly at the back of Mlle. Clairon's mind, even when she was at the apogee of her glory; and therefore she went aggressively out of her way to snub great ladies, in order that she might not be snubbed by them.

It was only a passing storm, however. We turn over the page, and the thunder dies away; and the middle-aged actress is discovered giving the young actor good advice in the matter of those gallantries which she considers not only natural but appropriate to adolescence :

“So you have made a conquest—and the lady is beautiful? I am not surprised, for you are a very pretty boy. But I cannot help telling you that you are a very silly boy too. If she is a lady who makes a profession of this sort of thing—or if she is a marriageable young woman—then you were quite right to keep out of her way. The former should be avoided for obvious reasons; intrigues with the latter are things to be ashamed of. With wives and widows, it is another matter. They are fair game and you are wrong not to avail yourself of your opportunities. No obligation—no prejudice—need restrain you. Be on your guard against a serious attachment; but

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

why on earth should you not pay the tribute demanded by your desires and your need for distraction ? ”

And then again :

“ M. de Buscher tells me that you are making many conquests. I hope you will not deny yourself such pleasures—your age requires them. But beware of any serious passion. A moment of pleasure often has to be paid for by years of pain and regret.”

It is very outspoken—one may even say very cynical; the advice of a man of the world rather than of a womanly woman. But the motive which inspired it was nevertheless very feminine, as appears in the letter written when Larive does form a serious attachment and talks of marriage :

“ I am old enough to be your mother. In the natural course of things I shall die long before you do. You are quite right to look out for a woman of your own age to assure you of an enduring happiness.

“ My fortune is not such that I could possibly do as much for you as they offer to do in that quarter. An income of twelve thousand francs—if she really has them, and if you are really to have the spending of them—is a very handsome dowry.

“ She promises to be true to you ? Of course she does—they always do. Perhaps she will keep her promise.

“ It hurts you to refuse her ? Your sympathetic soul cannot bear the thought of causing pain to one who loves you ? And so you ask my advice ? . . . But I cannot regard as simple kindness of heart your fear of wounding Mlle. Eugénie’s feelings. You

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

are in love with her—that is your only possible excuse. Otherwise you would not forget that all the happiness and comfort of my old age depends upon your affection, or concern yourself with her feelings without also thinking of mine. Love is a natural sentiment—specially natural to a man of your age; and I am not surprised. . . . So you must get married if you want to; but, as love is a transitory thing, I hope you will make sure that there is no mistake about the lady's fortune. That is the only advice I can give you; and the only request I have to make is that you will not come to Paris during Lent, or that, if you do, you will not let me know that you are there. . . .

“Farewell! May you be happy! Your happiness shall be my consolation, and my distress shall be your lesson on the instability of human life and fortune.”

That, of course, explains everything. For once in her life, at the age of fifty or thereabouts, Mlle. Clairon really loved—and loved in vain. Her counsels to Larive had really been concessions. She flattered herself that she knew men—and her opportunities of studying them had certainly been extensive. She believed that the fidelity of the heart could survive the infidelity of the desires: that the way to retain her empire over the one was not to be too exacting with regard to the other. So she exhorted her lover to gallantry in the hope that the pleasures of gallantry would keep him clear of the snares of sentiment. But she was wrong; and the principal reason why she was wrong was that her lover was little more than a boy, whereas she had passed her fiftieth birthday.

So all was over except the correspondence. That continued for some time longer; but Larive married

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

the daughter of the Director of the Brussels theatre, and Mlle. Clairon demonstrated that, whatever Larive might think, she was not too old to be adored, by accepting the position of left-handed Margravine of Anspach.

She was nearly old enough to be the Margrave's mother. He was well under forty, whereas she was decidedly over fifty. Moreover, he was already married, though his wife was a permanent invalid. The situation, therefore, is one which it is difficult to invest with any shining halo of romance; but Mlle. Clairon, with a pen in her hand, was not the woman to be deterred by such difficulties. Her *Memoirs* show her ashamed of nothing, but, on the contrary, fully convinced that, in throwing herself away on an unworthy sovereign, she has performed a noble act of virtue and self-sacrifice :

“ Paris ” (she writes) “ had no longer any but painful associations for me. There, I was no longer able to be of use to any one. The friendship of a sovereign permitted me to hope that it would still be possible for me to serve my fellow creatures. Compelled to exclude from my heart the one person who, of old, had filled it, warned against the dangers of love by the voices of reason and experience, but still consumed by the desire for love, I extended my sympathy and affection to all mankind, and was glad to avail myself of the opportunity presented to me of continuing to do good at least to a few individuals. So I set out.”

The context shows that by “ the one person ” who had formerly filled her heart she meant Valbelle. The letter just quoted shows that she might just as



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

well have meant Larive; and the net impression left on a biographer's mind is that, whereas she wept for Larive, she was only angry with Valbelle. Larive, at any rate, continued to be the recipient of her confidences, whereas Valbelle had passed out of her life for ever in a huff. She writes to Larive, in the first outburst of her enthusiasm, that she has "five footmen, a valet and a butler." Her letters to him are also our principal source of information with regard to the inconveniences of her position and her gradually growing dissatisfaction with it.

Her sojourn in the Margravate lasted for about seventeen years. At first she was a sort of a Mme. de Maintenon—very nearly a cabinet minister in petticoats. It was her boast that she had defeated a cabal for the overthrow of the cabinet, introduced economies—she hitherto so little economical—into the administration, and, in particular, made the arrangements for the paying off of a loan which carried interest at the absurd rate of 28 per cent. We even find her attempting diplomatic correspondence, though naïvely admitting in her dispatch (if we may call it so) to the Duc d'Aiguillon—the French Minister of War—that she has "little acquaintance with any other epistolary style than that of love-letters." She is very well pleased with herself:

"My health is good. My affections and my vanity could not fail to be satisfied with the care, the homage, the material benefits, and the marks of attachment lavished upon me. My house is always full of people; the greatest ladies in the land do me the honour of coming to supper with me. You cannot imagine what a figure I cut in this country. It is like a dream. Sometimes I am tempted to believe that I am really



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

a great personage; but you, my dear boy, know my heart too well to fear that my head will be turned."

The tone there is assuredly very different from the grand style which Mlle. Clairon affects when she writes for the public or for posterity. It breathes the exultation of the *Bohémienne* who is a *bourgeoise* at heart; of the *parvenue* who is agreeably surprised to find her superiors treating her as an equal. Her gratitude to the Prince who has so far exalted her is, for the moment, boundless :

"In addition" (she says) "to all these advantages, I enjoy the certainty that my presence contributes to the happiness of the best and most charming man whom I have ever known. You liked him when you met him; but that is nothing. One needs to be constantly in the society of this excellent Prince in order to appreciate all his merits. I see him every day, and his frankness and noble simplicity continually amaze me. It is a natural and proper thing to sacrifice one's life to sovereigns such as he; and I never, for one instant, regret the sacrifice which I have made to him."

Whence we gather that, in 1773, all appeared to be for the best in the best of all possible Margravates; but, alas! that happy state of things was not to endure very long. Already, in 1774, a change was coming over the spirit of Mlle. Clairon's dream. She complains of boredom; she complains of her health; she complains of her cook; she complains of the society in which she has to mix. The German *cuisine*, she says, is "disgusting and unwholesome"; the country is "barbarous and without resources"; her life there

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

is a "purgatory." She wants to be back in Paris, for Paris is "the only place worth living in"; she would return at once but for her fear that the Margrave would stop her allowance if she did so. German women are intolerable to her :

"The women of this country are devoid of grace, and of all those indefinable feminine charms to which you are accustomed. Cleanliness is not their strong point. They are virtuous by principle, through folly, from devotional considerations, and because their temperaments are cold."

All of which has its inner, as well as its superficial meaning. It means that Mlle. Clairon has discovered that she was mistaken as to the feelings of the great ladies of the Margravate towards her. Their first curiosity gratified, they were no longer affable, but laid themselves out to make her feel the difference between her position and theirs. Their calculated insolence was obviously inspired by the Margravine herself; and it put Mlle. Clairon on her mettle. She resolved to go to the Margravine and demand an explanation.

## CHAPTER XIII

Life at Anspach—The Margravine is stiff—Mlle. Clairon demands “Explanations”—Her Jealousy of Lady Craven—Her Return to Paris.

A FRENCH actress demanding “explanations” from a German Margravine, a Princess in her own right of the House of Coburg—requiring to know why she, the Margrave’s mistress, is not treated with more distinguished consideration and warmer cordiality by the Margrave’s wife : that surely is a scene without parallel in the history alike of Courts and theatres. We should ridicule it as incredible if we met it in a work of fiction ; and it is not impossible that there are grains of fiction in Mlle. Clairon’s presentation of it. But not many. The story is quite in keeping with what we know alike of her character, and of the character of the Margravine ; and we may follow it in the confident belief that it does not embellish the facts to any appreciable extent.

The Margravine, we must remember, though an aristocrat to the finger-tips, was meek and mild—a chronic invalid, sadly conscious that her infirmities made her unattractive—the sort of woman who finds it hard to hold her own when browbeaten in that grand manner of which tragedy is the school. And Mlle. Clairon was the best pupil of that school, and a past mistress of that manner. She had, as was said at the beginning, the magnificent airs of Mrs. Siddons, albeit without sharing Mrs. Siddons’s zeal

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

for virtue and propriety. She had, too, that plausibility which is born of self-assurance, and a sort of self-righteousness which was not the less impressive because the virtue on which it reposed was an unsubstantial figment of her imagination.

The scene, apparently, was the Margravine's boudoir. We discover the Margravine on her couch, made comfortable by cushions—pale, peevish, and proud; and then we perceive the actress sailing into her presence with the noble air of one of Corneille's persecuted heroines—subdued at first, but warming to her work as she proceeds, leading up to her effects with the art which long practice has made second nature to her. She speaks of “my profound respect for your Serene Highness”—of “the purity of my intentions and my conduct.” And then she flings out her challenge :

“Nevertheless, madam, your cordiality towards me diminishes daily. You condescend, indeed, to receive me, and even to invite me to your table; you have never said a word to me of which I can complain. But I have far too much experience of the ways of the world not to realise that my presence annoys you, and that you only accept my society from the fear of displeasing the Margrave. This change in your manner is so painful to me that I am compelled to inquire the reason of it. Of what does your Highness accuse me? What have I done? What has your Highness been told?”

It was a bold challenge. One might have expected the Margravine to meet it with an order to her lackeys and a reference to the door. Instead of that, there came a feeble murmur from the couch to the effect

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

that a wife could hardly be expected to cherish affection for her husband's mistress; and that was the cue for which Mlle. Clairon was waiting. She paused for a moment, as if examining the Margravine's argument. Then she took up the cue and gave the result of her reflections :

“The Margrave has told me all about his adventures. You yourself, madam, have also deigned to tell me how he has neglected you, and how unkindly his mistresses have treated you. One of them, as I happen to know, clamoured for your divorce, tried to take precedence of you in your own Court, and would have slapped your face if she had not been stopped in time. All of them, without exception, have continually lured your husband away from your embraces and your bedchamber. This sort of thing has been going on for twenty years. You ought to be used to it by this time; and you ought also to realise that, as a mistress is necessary to the Margrave, she who exhorts him to remember his conjugal obligations, and never to fail to visit you before leaving his Palace or after returning to it, is a very different sort of mistress from the others—is a mistress, in short, to whom you cannot refuse your cordial friendship without grave injustice.”

Perhaps not. Mlle. Clairon certainly “reasoned well.” But the Margravine was not persuaded. She hugged her grievance, and was reluctant to let go of it. The purity of the actress's intentions, one may presume, was less apparent to her than the aggressiveness of her intrusion. “But you monopolise him,” she protested. “Surely you can understand that that is extremely disagreeable to me.”



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

Whereupon it was Mlle. Clairon's turn to protest. She had no desire, she said, to monopolise the Margrave, though she had sacrificed a great deal in order to take up her residence in his dominions. What she had always desired was—a happy *ménage-à-trois*. If such a happy *ménage* had not been constituted, the blame lay entirely with the Margravine :

“ If you treated me better, I should come to see you oftener. The Margrave would come with me. It is you yourself who exclude the Margrave from your society by insisting upon keeping me at a distance.”

“ But you make out that he prefers you to me,” the Margravine ventured to object. “ I do not make it out, but it is quite natural that he should do so,” was Mlle. Clairon's rejoinder to that; and she proceeded, with uncompromising candour, to point out several respects in which she considered that she had a right to consider herself more attractive than the Margravine :

“ I use rouge, and it gives me the appearance of a woman who is still young and cheerful. Your face is pale enough to put an extinguisher on any man's desires. Besides, whenever he sees you, you are occupied with your melancholy needle-work, from which you never lift your eyes. He hates to see you at it, and he can't induce you to give it up. I, on my part, am always ready to pitch anything he doesn't like out of the window.”

That pleased the Margrave; and if the Margravine imagined that Mlle. Clairon was paid for pleasing him,

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

then the Margravine was very much mistaken. The actress insisted upon that with the noble air of one who can patiently bear any affront except a charge of interested motives :

“ They have deceived you, madam. The expenses of my establishment are incurred solely on account of the Margrave and his guests. The state of my health is such that I cannot even taste the delicacies which are served on my table. A slice of plain roast beef—that is all that I ever touch, and I’m sure it can’t cost you a florin a day. Indeed, I have spent at least fourteen thousand francs of my own money since I have been here. If you don’t believe me, ask the Margrave.”

It was from the Margrave, however, that the Margravine had got her information. She said so; and then Mlle. Clairon played her great card. “ My Lord,” she called, throwing open the door; and the Margrave answered her summons. And then :

“ My Lord, I hear that you have told her Highness that I receive payment for the services which I render in your dominions. Will you be so good as to give her full details of the payments ? ”

“ I beg your pardon a thousand times, my dear lady. I must confess that I did tell her Serene Highness that you received payment.”

“ And is it true that I am paid ? ”

“ No, my dear lady, it is not true. I told her Serene Highness a lie.”

Assuredly he had either lied to her Serene Highness in the past or else was lying to her now. The

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

Margravine may well have wondered on which of the two occasions he had told the truth; but she was soon given something else to wonder about. The actress indignantly rebuked the Margrave for his falsehood, and bade him leave the room. "What power you have over him! It is marvellous!" the Margravine exclaimed in admiration; and the actress, left alone with her, communicated the secret of her primacy in the Margrave's heart. She owed it, she said, to the fact that she was well-informed and entered into his serious interests; and she exhorted the Margravine to follow her example if she could:

"He thinks you are indolent; but you should yourself take the measure of your capacity. You are capable—are you not?—of study, of reflection, and of the dignified bearing and philosophic wisdom which the enterprises of statesmanship require."

Whereto the Margravine replied that she did not know; but that she would pull herself together and try; and that, if she succeeded, she would regard Mlle. Clairon as the best friend she had ever had. And so the curtain falls on reconciliation and a happy ending, just as on the stage. It may be doubted, of course, whether the actress really played the *beau rôle* which she assigns to herself exactly as she has chronicled it; but there can be no question that she did, by whatever means, achieve the victory, and so entrench and fortify her position in the Margravate—a position which was ultimately to be overthrown, not by the Margravine, but by an English visitor, Elizabeth, Countess of Craven.

Lady Craven had separated from her husband for reasons which her friends admitted to be adequate.

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

She travelled on the Continent, and was well received at the French Court. In the course of her travels she made the acquaintance of the Margrave, who invited her to Anspach. She accepted the invitation, and, as the lawyers put it, "on that plea issue was joined" between her and Mlle. Clairon. Each of the two ladies wished to regard herself as an Egeria and her rival as a Phryne; each of them has expressed herself very spitefully about the other. We may begin by presenting Lady Craven's view of the situation:

"Accident" (she writes in her *Memoirs*) "had led the Margrave to an acquaintance with Mlle. Clairon, the celebrated French actress, who shone at Paris as the first female tragedian of her time. As Mlle. Clairon perfectly well knew how to appreciate the value of such a man, she formed the design of ingratiating herself into his favour by every means that the fertility of her powers produced. Well aware of the candour of this prince, of his noble and unaffected simplicity, of the tender and constant interest which her society must excite if her plans were well arranged, she determined at once to effect a superiority over his heart, which she knew must, from his unfortunate situation, be vacant. . . . Under the pretence of disinterested affection, she therefore quitted Paris, to throw the spell of her sensibility over a soul which she well knew to be capable of the utmost refinement."

Which is, of course, a long-winded way of saying that Mlle. Clairon was a designing minx; which, equally of course, was exactly what Mlle. Clairon thought of Lady Craven. As for Mlle. Clairon's



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

statement to the Margravine, and to posterity, that she “cost nothing” and was “not paid” for the services which she rendered, Lady Craven meets it with an explicit contradiction :

“During this time, Mlle. Clairon was living at the Margrave’s expense, with four French servants in livery. . . . The Margrave supplied her table with the best wines from his cellar; and, as she gave *petits soupers* to the Margrave and his friends, her people, of course, consumed more than could be properly furnished. Her expenses were enormous, and all paid from the Chamber of Finances at Anspach. These facts I had from the Maréchaux of the Court.”

Lady Craven continues :

“It was at this period of her grandeur that I made my appearance at Anspach. As it was impossible for her to be blind to the sincere regard which the Margrave had for me, it was of course to be expected that my presence would rouse her feelings, and prompt her to attempt to work upon the Margrave by every means in her power.”

The principal means which Mlle. Clairon adopted was to write the Margrave a letter denouncing Lady Craven in no measured terms :

“Your unbridled passion” (she said) “for a woman whom, unfortunately, you do not know—the overthrow of your plans and my destiny—your entire disregard for public opinion—the licentiousness of your morals—your want of respect for your own age and dignity—have obliged me to discover in



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

you either a vicious soul, which ceases to be restrained, or a misguided head which ought to be pitied. . . .

“ . . . . The veil is fallen; I find that I have ever been the miserable victim of your egotism and your various fancies. . . . It is impossible for me to conceive how you have not blushed to appear before my eyes as a tyrant wishing to torture me to death. Just Heaven! Are you the man whom I have held up as the model of virtue? . . . I see that I can advance no further claims, and that our bonds are to be dissolved for ever. . . . My soul, as tender as it is constant, will carry to the grave the sentiments which I have dictated to you. I pity, I compassionate, I pardon you, and I wish you the same portion of happiness and of glory as I experience of grief and regret.”

Etc., etc., etc.; for the letter is much too long to be quoted in its entirety. Lady Craven quotes it, however, and comments on it; and her comments are characteristically those of an aristocrat, accustomed to despise actresses as dirt beneath her feet. Her great point is that Mlle. Clairon mistook her, in her ignorance, for “a young and poor adventurer from England who had come to seek an asylum in the Margrave’s territory”; that the Margrave had so great a respect for her that he would not even allow Mlle. Clairon to question him about her; that Mlle. Clairon was so much annoyed at “the firm and cold tone with which he answered her” that she had Lady Craven watched by spies—the sort of thing which Lady Craven considered it natural for that sort of person to do :

“As I was in full dress” (she continues), “and

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

probably had an appearance which might strike this observer, he reported to Mlle. Clairon that the young Englishwoman was fair and handsome. She immediately conjectured that it must be a mistress of the Margrave's . . . nor was she undeceived until some time after when she discovered that this woman was of high birth, and not, as she supposed, *une chercheuse d'aventures à Paris*."

Thus the battle raged; thus the shafts of feline amenity were fired. The quarrel is not one in which either patriotism or chivalry requires the biographer to take a side, or to adjudicate between the competing claims of Lady Craven's higher rank and Mlle. Clairon's priority of possession. We may reasonably believe a good deal of what each of the rivals said to the detriment of the other; and we may be fairly sure that Lady Craven owed her victory neither to her rank nor to her virtue, but to her youth. She was only thirty-nine, whereas Mlle. Clairon was sixty-six; and, though the years bring wisdom as their gift, the normal man does not like his Egeria to be too heavily burdened with them. The Margrave of Anspach was, in that respect, a normal man; and when the Margravine died in 1791, it was Lady Craven whom he invited to be her successor. Her husband's death having set her free, he married her; and the marriage is said to have been a perfectly happy one.

Mlle. Clairon, at that date, was seventy-one. She had returned, on the eve of the Revolution, to spend her declining years in Paris; but even those years were not destined to be amorously uneventful. Even as a septuagenarian, she was not too old to be loved; and the discarded Egeria of the Margrave

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

of Anspach was still, in her extreme old age, to kindle a flame in the heart of the Baron de Staël-Holstein. The episode is one of which her previous biographers had only a glimmering suspicion; but the full truth concerning it has just been discovered in the Tower of the Archives at Coppet.

## CHAPTER XIV

Mlle. Clairon and M. de Staël—Interesting Documents discovered in the Tower of the Archives at Coppet—Love-letters—M. de Staël makes Settlements.

EDMOND DE GONCOURT'S *Life of Mlle. Clairon* contains one puzzled and puzzling mention of M. de Staël :

“ I do not know on what serious authority M. de Manne affirms, in his second edition of *La Troupe de Voltaire*, that the house at Issy which Baron de Staël gave to Mlle. Clairon, not being kept in tenable repair by him, fell into such a state of dilapidation that the roof no longer protected the old woman from the rains of Heaven, and she had to seek shelter elsewhere.”

And a footnote is added to the effect that M. de Manne's information is incorrect, as the house in question was given to Mlle. Clairon by the Margrave of Anspach.

One finds, again, an enigmatic reference to Mlle. Clairon in the recently published correspondence between Mme. de Staël and her confidential factotum Henri Meister. One only gathers from it, however, the vague impression that there has been trouble of some sort : that Mlle. Clairon has been making herself unpleasant, and that acrimonious letters have been received. Without further clues, it was impossible to make head or tail of the allusion. But the

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

secret was not lost. It came to light when M. d'Haussonville—Mme. de Staël's great-grandson—pursuing his investigations in the Tower of the Archives at Coppet, lighted upon a bundle of papers, thus endorsed, in a handwriting which was, apparently, that of the family lawyer :

“ Letters from Mlle. Clairon to M. de Staël, from which it could be proved, if necessary, with what rare generosity that respectable gentleman treated that young lady in the later years of her life.”

“ Young lady ” is, of course, the designation of courtesy—the tribute to the doctrine that no actress, however long she lives, can ever be regarded as old. Courtesy, in this case, was stretched as if it had been an india-rubber band; for Mlle. Clairon was old enough to be M. de Staël's mother. He, when they first met, was forty-three, whereas she was sixty-nine. They made each other's acquaintance in the dark days of the Revolution, when the Reign of Terror was just beginning—Mme. de Staël having retired to Switzerland while her husband remained in Paris to attend to his duties as the diplomatic representative of Sweden.

Mlle. Clairon, at the time, was infirm as well as old, and lonely as well as infirm. She was in no direct danger from the political tempest—she lived too obscurely for even the most suspicious to suspect her of intriguing with the aristocrats; but the disorders had deranged her finances. Her investments ceased to be profitable, and the Comédie Française ceased to pay her pension. She was reduced, not indeed to complete destitution, but, at any rate, to genteel poverty. A letter which she wrote to Henri



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

Meister reveals her as a very unhappy woman. She complains pathetically to him of her wrinkles, her white hairs, and her aching joints. She pictures herself to him "without friends, without relatives, without occupation"—"eating her loving heart out"; and yet she adds: "My heart is only between twenty-five and thirty."

Such was the condition of things—materially, mentally, and morally—when she met M. de Staël at an evening-party. There is no absolutely contemporary correspondence bearing on the subject; but we have a scrap of a diary which Mlle. Clairon kept a little later, and gave to her friend; and one gathers it was a case, if not of love, at least of friendship, at first sight.

"My experiences" (she wrote) "warned me to beware of men like you. My age was so advanced that I was only capable of the emotions of the heart. How comes it then that my attachment dates from the moment when I first cast eyes on you? How was it that, even before I had seen you a second time, your interests became dearer to me than my own?"

That was the first question; and the second was: What had the gay and gallant diplomatist of forty-three seen to attract him in a shrivelled old woman of sixty-nine? What motive had induced him to follow up the acquaintance? It could not have been her beauty, for she was no longer beautiful:

"What then" (she asks) "was the instinct, the intuition of sympathy which guided your steps towards me? Standing as I do on the verge of the grave, I can do nothing for your happiness and your

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

comfort. On the contrary, I make inroads on your fortune, my infirmities add to your troubles, and I shall soon distress you by my death. I can do nothing for you; you are doing everything for me."

And she went on :

" Providence has taken charge of my happiness. Providence has commissioned you to help me to endure my troubles and my life, and to lift me out of the abyss of wretchedness into which I have been plunged by the disorders prevailing in my unhappy country. No other man could have worked such a change upon my heart."

The friendship, however, of which such high hopes were entertained, had hardly begun when M. de Staël was recalled to Stockholm to explain why he had shown himself so favourable to the Revolution. The interval was filled with correspondence; the first letter being dated August 7, 1793. Mlle. Clairon says in it that, though she feels on the point of succumbing beneath the burden of her infirmities, the sensibility of her heart remains unimpaired : that her miserable existence derives some charm from the opportunity of telling M. de Staël of the warmth of her sentiments towards him, but that she is so blind that she can hardly see to write, and that her rheumatic pains are continually compelling her to drop the pen. And, presently, she reproaches him, just as a younger mistress would have reproached a younger lover, for not writing as often as he ought :

" Since your departure, I have only known three moments of calm and joy—the three moments at

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

which I received your three letters. . . . Three letters—only three little letters! Is that enough for two such friends as we are? Is that enough for a proud and sympathetic woman, who lies under the greatest obligations to you, and whose long experience has taught her always to fear the worst?”

And then comes the inevitable transition from sentiment to business; and Mlle. Clairon showed the completeness of her confidence in M. de Staël by telling him that her circumstances were embarrassed, and that her income was inadequate to her needs. She did not merely tell him this in a general way, but went into all the details. She wanted, she said, an establishment which should include a cook, a housemaid, and a charwoman. She also wanted to keep poultry, and to be able to afford herself twenty-four pounds of chocolate—besides specified quantities of rice, vermicelli and semolina—in the course of the twelvemonth. It was her habit—a habit, as we have seen, of fifty years’ standing—to live at the expense of her admirers; and as M. de Staël protested that he admired her very much——

Such was the appeal, and it was not made in vain. M. de Staël went before a lawyer and made “settlements.” The details are a little obscure; but it seems that he bought from Mlle. Clairon the house which the Margrave of Anspach had given her, and guaranteed her the use of it for life, reserving only one apartment in it for himself, and made himself responsible for all her taxes, and undertook to pay her an allowance of £200 a year. According to our English law the contract could probably have been upset, at any time, on the ground that there had been “no consideration”—if not on the ground that

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

there had been "an immoral consideration." According to the French Revolutionary Law it appears to have been binding—whence presently, as we shall see, there was trouble for M. de Staël. In the meantime, however, he spent about £2000 on Mlle. Clairon, and her expressions of gratitude were unbounded :

"You honour me with the name of friend" (she wrote), "and you guarantee me against all the horrors of poverty. From the verge of the grave, to which I have been dragged by my infirmities and the present discontents, you have brought me back to the sweet and innocent illusions of the springtime of my life. To you I shall owe the happiness of having some one to love until the hour of my last sigh."

And Mme. de Staël ?

It is impossible to say how much she knew. But she certainly knew something, and she probably knew a good deal; and she raised no objection. She was at Coppet at the time, devoting herself to Benjamin Constant; and it may be supposed to have suited her that her husband's interests and affections should also be occupied. One can cite a convincing letter in support of the thesis :

"You are quite right" (she wrote) "to have Mlle. Clairon with you, if she amuses you and does not slander me too much. Those are the only two conditions which I impose upon your friends, and the former condition is one on which I do not really insist."

In another letter Mme. de Staël chaffs her husband on Mlle Clairon's preference for the society of



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

handsome young men ; and there are yet other letters in which she proposes to make Mlle. Clairon useful to herself. She had written a tragedy entitled *Montmorency*, which still lies unpublished in the Tower of the Archives ; and she asked her husband to show Mlle. Clairon a copy of it, with the message :

“ There is, however, one condition which I attach to my gift. It is that you must write to me in detail, informing me what the people who read my play say about it. . . . Moreover Mlle. Clairon has many acquaintances among actors. Pray tell her how important it is to me that my work should be brought under their notice.”

That, in view of all the circumstances, was surprisingly amiable ; and Mlle. Clairon reciprocated the amiability. She wrote Mme. de Staël a polite letter ; and when M. de Staël went to see his wife, she refrained from corresponding with him, but contented herself with keeping a diary, to be given to him at a later date. In the diary, however, she lets her heart speak freely, telling M. de Staël that his absence will be “ a privation very difficult to bear,” predicting for herself “ a long series of miserable days,” and promising to count the hours until his return. It will suffice to quote a few of the most strikingly ardent passages :

“ Worthy of all affection and all material good things, I found you unhappy. All sympathetic souls are readily caught on the hook which pity throws to them. From that moment I identified my interests with yours. Your confidence and friendship have given my life a larger outlook. You have made



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

it my duty to confirm, and, if necessary, to acquire the virtues which would justify your attachment. . . .”

“ . . . You can picture me, dear, in my little room. You know that, whenever I lift my eyes, they fall upon the little picture which your good lady at Geneva wanted to take away from me. This morning, a phrase which I read in *Seneca*, and applied to you, caused me to drop my book in order to hold converse with that noble and charming figure. There I see him, I said to myself, just as he was, in all probability, when he was twenty. . . .”

“ . . . If only I could have kissed him once ! I am very old, and very infirm. Alas ! who knows whether I shall ever see him again ? Good and just God, read the secrets of my heart ! You know that my only reason for wishing to live is that I may be able to love him a little longer.”

If Mme. de Staël was in the habit of reading her husband's letters, it certainly was better for the peace of the household that he should not receive such letters while he was staying with her. The sentiments were far more appropriately enshrined in a *Journal Intime*. But the time nevertheless came when Mme. de Staël guessed the facts which had been concealed from her. She not only guessed them, but put her own interpretation on them in the light of her knowledge of Mlle. Clairon's character. There are two letters which show her in the act of doing so. One of the letters speaks of the revival of “an old prejudice against Mlle. Clairon”; the other is more explicit. M. de Staël has, in some way, given his wife reason to complain of him; and this is her rejoinder to a letter of his which has been lost :

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

“Even my father, who does not share the heart-aches which the endeavour to retain your friendship has caused me, was startled by your letter. This is not your true character. An old woman who has outlived her amiability and wants your money is evidently inspiring your behaviour towards me: behaviour which is far removed from your ordinary good-heartedness and generosity of character.”

We do not know what had happened—very likely nothing in particular had happened. But if Mme. de Staël did not know Mlle. Clairon as well as her husband, she judged her better. The proof of that, convincing even to M. de Staël himself, was soon to be forthcoming, and shall be set forth in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER XV

M. de Staël unable to carry out his Pecuniary Engagements to Mlle. Clairon—She sues him, obtains Judgment and levies Execution—The final years of Obscurity and Destitution.

ALL went well as long as Mlle. Clairon could count upon M. de Staël's bounties—or rather upon the indirect and diverted bounties of M. de Staël's wife. For five years he paid the bills; and there are receipts in the Tower of the Archives for a total sum of 49,926 francs handed to her or disbursed on her behalf. Towards 1801, however, he was himself in difficulties. He had lost his Embassy and its emoluments; his wife had separated from him and resumed the control of her own fortune; his creditors were pressing for payment of their dues. He had to leave the Embassy and live in a small apartment, for which he paid a rent of no more than £72 a year; and he found himself unable to continue the payment of Mlle. Clairon's pension.

He did what he could for her. Though no longer an ambassador, he was nevertheless a *persona grata* at the French Foreign Office, and had influence with French Cabinet Ministers. He wrote to the Minister of the Interior, who was also Minister *ad interim* of Fine Arts, pointing out that a pension was due to Mlle. Clairon from the Comédie Française, and that only a portion of the amount to which she was entitled had been paid to her, and requesting the Minister to look into the matter as a personal favour to himself. This was the reply which he received :

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

“ SIR,

“ I have the honour to acknowledge the receipt of your letter of Messidor 26, informing me of the interest which you take in the fortunes of Mlle. Clairon.

“ I beg to assure you that I have assigned to this actress the sum of 700 francs which, added to the sum of 1000 francs paid to her in the Month of Nivose, completes the total of the arrears due.

“ Accept my salutations,

“ LUCIEN BONAPARTE.”

’Twas well; ’twas something; but it was not enough for Mlle. Clairon. She was not only looking for an opportunity of demonstrating the depth of her gratitude or the sincerity of her professions of regard. She was also only looking for M. de Staël’s allowance of £200 a year; she meant to have that £200 a year or know the reason why. So she put the matter in the hands of her solicitor—who was no other than Cavaignac; and the solicitor put the matter in the hands of the bailiff; and Eric Magnus Baron de Staël-Holstein was served with a writ which informed him that judgment had been given against him, and that, if he failed to satisfy the judgment within the stipulated period of grace, an execution would be levied on his furniture on the plaintiff’s behalf.

The judgment was not satisfied, and the execution was duly levied, the goods seized including a complete set of autographed presentation copies of Mme. de Staël’s books. Whether the effects were actually sold is uncertain, for the Tower of the Archives contains no record of the sale; but the presumption that they were sold is strong, for there is no mention of either furniture or books in the inventory of M. de

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

Staël's estate, drawn up at the time of his death. So that there can, in truth, be little question but that his mistress had taken them from him and disposed of them to the best advantage—a truly sordid termination to the least romantic of all our theatrical romances.

The story of that romance, however, solves a mystery by which Edmond de Goncourt professed himself puzzled. In 1801, he points out, Mlle. Clairon made a will which indicated that she was still a woman of substance; her legatees including a maid, a footman, and a cook. In 1803, she was practically begging her bread, representing herself in a petition, addressed to Chaptal, the Minister of the Interior, as “seventy-nine years of age, lacking everything but the bare necessities of life, though formerly celebrated for my talents.” And Edmond de Goncourt asks himself: What had intervened to bring about this quick change in her fortunes?

The answer is simple: the insolvency of M. de Staël had intervened. His 49,926 francs—and his £200 a year—had provided alike the legacies and the legatees. When his payments ceased, Mlle. Clairon had to dismiss her servants, and removed to the house of her adopted daughter, Mme. de la Rianderie, in the Rue de Lille. There she lived an obscure life on the scanty resources still left to her—or possibly on her adopted daughter's humble fortune. Occasionally—but very rarely—a distinguished visitor called to pay his homage and satisfy his curiosity. Among others, John Kemble called, and persuaded her to sit up in her bed and recite to him one of those passionate scenes from *Phèdre* in which she had formerly excelled; but that was the last flicker of her failing powers. She fell when she got out of her bed one day, was



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

lifted back into it, and never left it again, but died, on the last day of January 1803, just a week after her eightieth birthday.

A sad life truly—in spite of the glitter and the glory—a life which points its own moral without needing much help from the moralist. A life which lacked, above all things, sincerity, and so paid the penalty of the defect: a life dependent upon artifice and affectation, and therefore uncheered by any loving sentiments of sympathy at the age when the artifices were no longer possible, and the deceptions had ceased to deceive.

## CHAPTER XVI

Mlle. Montansier—A Young Woman from the Country—Become the fashion as “La belle Béarnaise”—“Known to the Police”—Financed in Theatrical Management by an Admirer—Her Success at Nantes—And at Versailles—Marie-Antoinette’s Friendship for her—She applies for a Monopoly of all the Theatres in France—Her Plans upset by the Revolution.

ONE feels the need of a new Samuel Smiles, with a wider outlook, to relate the rise of Mlle. Montansier. The actual Samuel Smiles, with his restricted outlook, would probably have refused her admission to his Pantheon because she was once one of those whom George Gissing classified as “the unclassed”; but that would have been ungenerous—and even unjust. For, after all, Mlle. Montansier rose above her station and achieved Success in Life: not by art—or even artfulness—nor yet by beauty; but by displaying the solid qualities of a capable woman of business. She was something more than an actress—she was an actress who “went into management,” and prospered, attaining to that “honoured age” which used to be held out as the probable reward of a careful study of Cassell’s *Popular Educator*. Moreover, she was very nearly married, for her money, at the age of sixty-three, by that unscrupulous young fortune-hunter General Bonaparte, who was so soon to become Emperor of the French. Her place, therefore, in any gallery of Women Who Have Risen should be assured.

Montansier, of course, was not her real name. It

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

was the name of one of her aunts; and she annexed it in circumstances which we shall come to immediately. Her actual name was Marguerite Brunet; she was the daughter of a pinmaker in business at Bayonne, and was educated at an Ursuline convent. She was sent to America to a distant relative from whom she had "expectations"; but the relative died on the day of her arrival, and the expectations were not realised. She came back, and, almost immediately after her return, was left an orphan: "unprovided for," but very attractive and high-spirited—and not quite eighteen years of age. One may suppose that her trip across the Atlantic had given her a taste for adventure; it was a taste, at any rate, which she had acquired. And Paris was the best scene for such adventures as she could expect to shine in; so she remembered that she had an aunt in Paris, and decided to join her there. It is not clear whether she told her aunt that she was coming; but the manner of her coming must, in any case, have surprised her aunt.

For already on the diligence, adventures had begun for her. She had received proposals which she had declined; and she had boxed the ears of at least one of the aspirants. None the less, however, her refusals had seemed provocative; and one of the suitors—the Marquis de Cosse, a notorious Lovelace of the period—had laid a plot of a kind which one often reads about in eighteenth-century fiction. A messenger in his service accosted the dazed young woman from the country, and offered to guide her to a respectable and suitable lodging-house. She accepted his offer; and the house to which he conducted her was neither a lodging-house nor respectable. The young woman from the country discovered that she had been abducted and was now

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

imprisoned—albeit in a well-appointed and luxuriously upholstered cell. Her maid (or female warder) bade her put on the prison garb—which was the most sumptuous dress that she had ever seen. She learnt that her Lovelace had arranged a supper-party, and proposed to introduce her, that very evening, to a select company of his friends, as his latest conquest.

But this young woman from the country was not to be conquered, but to conquer; she saw through the plot for her humiliation, and she laid her plans. She put on the dress, and arrayed herself in the accompanying jewels: these were the legitimate spoils of victory. She went down to supper; but, at the supper-table, she sprang a surprise on her host. She drank his health, thanked him for his hospitality, and made a little speech. He had promised, she said, that, after the supper was over, one of the guests—whichever she herself preferred—should have the privilege of seeing her home. His protests were drowned in the clamorous demand that she should announce her choice; and she surveyed the company, and did so:

“ M. de Richelieu,” she said, “ will you be so good as to give me your arm ? ”

“ With the greatest pleasure, mademoiselle. Whither may I have the honour of conducting you ? ”

“ To the shop of Madame Montansier, old-clothes-dealer, in the Rue Saint-Roch.”

So the young woman from the country was delivered from the snare which her Lovelace had set, and arrived safely at her aunt’s establishment, in the small hours of the morning, attired with astonishing

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

magnificence, and escorted by the flower of the nobility of France.

It was very fine, very theatrical, very indicative of character; but if the aunt imagined that the long-lost niece who came to her arms in that dramatic manner proposed to settle down quietly behind the counter and spend her life in haggling over the price of cast-off wardrobes, she was in error. The niece had acquired a taste for adventure and meant to gratify it; and adventure, in her case, could, of course, mean nothing but gallantry. By flouting the gallant who had tried to coerce her, she had gained a valuable advertisement. Within a day or two, she was the talk of Paris—*lancée* as *la belle Béarnaise*. She took her aunt's name, which sounded better than her own, and, as Mlle. Montansier, entered upon the career of a professional beauty.

Nor are the details of that career wrapped in any clouds of mystery. Mlle. Montansier was "known to the police"; and the police of the reign of Louis XV were expected, as has already appeared in the account of Mlle. Clairon, to know a good deal more than the police of the present day. A special Police Department was detailed to study the private lives of actresses and professional beauties, and deliver a daily report of their discoveries to the King.

It is possible that those reports were originally required for some higher purpose than the satisfaction of a prurient curiosity. In practice, the King read them in the spirit in which he might have run his eye over the indiscreet revelations of a scandalous society paper. He liked to be able to embarrass the members of his Court by displaying an unexpected knowledge of their levities—to be able to nudge a grave



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

nobleman, and say to him with a leer : “ Aha ! You sly dog ! Where did you have supper last night ? What sort of a present did you give your charming hostess ? You think I don’t know, but I do.” The reports were drafted chiefly with that end in view. They are still preserved in the French Archives, and are, from time to time, disinterred by the inquisitive. Those of them which relate to the proceedings of Mlle. Montansier have been disinterred by that erudite historian of the theatre—M. L.- Henri Lecomte.

They trace her career from the age of eighteen to the age of thirty-three. They tell us how an admirer took her to the West Indies, and, tiring of her, set her up in business in a bonnet-shop—and how she, on her part, tiring of the bonnet-shop, abandoned it and returned to Paris. They tell us in what style she established herself, and from what tradesmen she obtained credit : she had, it seems, “ two negro servants attired in blue, a footman, and two maids ; ” and she purchased six thousand francs’ worth of furniture on the system of “ payment by instalments.” Long lists of her protectors are given, and there are descriptions of the gaieties of her receptions : “ She gives a party nearly every day ; the company, as a rule, drinks heavily, makes a great noise, and does not break up until three or four in the morning.” It is even added that a particular admirer has given her thirty louis, and that “ she is believed to be saving money.”

Such is the picture ; and one would not trouble to draw it if there were no contrasting picture beyond. But the contrast, as has already been indicated, is very striking. Women who live such lives as Mlle. Montansier was living until she was well over thirty

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

have, as a rule, no resources other than their transitory charms, and are apt, when those charms forsake them, to fall into poverty and die in hospitals. Mlle. Montansier was far too clever and resourceful to do that. *La vie galante* was, for her, only an interlude—perhaps only a means to an end. Though she had despised the old-clothes-shop and the bonnet-shop as openings unworthy of her gifts, she nevertheless desired to be a successful woman of business, enjoying economic independence; and, of course, it was the function of her admirers to help her.

One of them was M. de Saint-Contest. He was only eighteen, but he was the son of the Minister for Foreign Affairs. In that capacity, he could pull the wires of influence; and Mlle. Montansier called upon him to pull them. She would like, she said, to run a theatre, and M. de Saint-Contest must provide her with a theatre to run. He did as he was told; and Mlle. Montansier was sufficiently in earnest to be willing to begin in the provinces. She passed straight from the *vie galante* of Paris to undertake the management of a theatre in comparative exile at Nantes.

And she succeeded: that is the wonderful thing about it—her claim to the sympathetic consideration of a latter-day Samuel Smiles.

It was nothing new of course, even in those days, for a professional beauty to obtain a theatrical engagement through the influence of a powerful protector. It was not an absolutely unknown thing for a professional beauty, thus pushed forward, to distinguish herself as an actress. Her beauty, in such a case, could play its part as the serviceable handmaid of her talents. But management—that is a very different

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

matter. Beauty may help a woman to act; but it cannot help her to organise—to make both ends meet in the ordinary way of business; and the life of a professional beauty is not the best apprenticeship for a business calling. But Mlle. Montansier did make both ends meet—and something more. Her theatre at Nantes not only paid, but acquired a reputation, akin to that of the late Sarah Thorne at Margate, as an excellent training-school for neophytes. She was able to cherish more ambitious schemes—she and her “leading man” together.

He was an ex-cavalry officer named Neuville, six years Mlle. Montansier's junior: not a very good actor, but still good enough. He became her partner—no doubt in more senses than one; but it was she who was the managing partner and made the fortune of the firm. Her friendship with M. de Saint-Contest continued; but Neuville's jealousy, if we may assume him to have been jealous, was not allowed to interfere with business. The friendship was, so to say, part of the working capital of the partnership, to be exploited for the joint benefit of the partners. They wanted a theatre at Versailles, and M. de Saint-Contest obtained them the little house in the Rue Satory. They wanted a larger house, and M. de Saint-Contest got them leave to build one—dying a few days after it was opened, as one who felt that his work was done, and he might now depart in peace. The cost of the site and the construction was rather more than £14,000—figures which prove eloquently that Mlle. Montansier was now getting on.

That was in 1776, when she was forty-six years of age. She would have been entitled to reckon herself successful, even if she had never climbed any higher;

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

but her success, in fact, was only beginning, and was no longer to depend upon the influence of masculine admirers. If she lost a powerful supporter in M. de Saint-Contest, she gained a supporter still more powerful in Marie-Antoinette, who was just then embarking upon that course of irresponsible frivolity which brought her brother all the way from Vienna to Versailles to scold her. "Gambling," said Joseph, denouncing one of his sister's weaknesses, "causes us to introduce into our private apartments persons who ought never to be allowed to get further than our antechambers"; and Mlle. Montansier was one of the persons to whom he obviously alluded.

It had come about through the Queen's simultaneous passion for the excitements of the theatre and the novelties of the simple life. While watching the performance of the comedians from the royal box, she had smelt the onion soup which the comedians were preparing for their supper behind the scenes. It was an appetising odour, and she asked that a basin of the refecton might be sent up to her. Of course the soup was brought; of course Mlle. Montansier served it with her own hands; and that was her opportunity. The Queen was interested in the gossip of the *coulisses*; and the manageress of the theatre naturally had that gossip at her finger-ends. The upshot was that the manageress was given her *entrée* to the *petits levers*—which meant, in practice, that she was required to attend and tell the Queen funny stories while she breakfasted in bed.

And that, of course, was only the insertion of the thin end of the wedge. There soon followed commands to card-parties, and commands to assist in the organisation of amateur theatricals at the Petit



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

Trianon, where she acted, sometimes as stage-directress, and sometimes as dramatic coach. In short the Queen made a friend of her, almost as she did of the Princesse de Lamballe; and the same cruel libels were circulated about the one friendship as about the other. There is no reason for believing a word of them; but, of course, there were abundant reasons for lifting the eyebrows, and shrugging the shoulders, and saying that Mlle. Montansier was a queer associate for royalty.

Nor did all those reasons belong to Mlle. Montansier's past. If her past had been scandalous, her present was, at least, audacious; and there were those about the Court who refused to take a benevolent view of her audacities. Louis XVI himself ordered her to prison for some unspecified "impertinence"; and the manner in which she received the announcement of her sentence was also impertinent :

*" ' N'aurai-je aucune société,' a-t-elle dit, ' et le roi ordonne-t-il absolument que je couche seule ? ' "*

The King laughed, and the Court had no difficulty in laughing too. The story went the rounds, and Marie-Antoinette can hardly have failed to hear it; but it made no difference to her. The directress of the theatre continued to retail the latest gossip in her bedroom, and, like the excellent woman of business that she was, obtained her reward, not in smiles and thanks, but in privileges and concessions. She was appointed the titular director of various theatres in the provinces : notably those at Orléans, Caen, Havre, and Rouen. At Rouen, Neuville took charge; in the other towns managers responsible to



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

the directress were appointed. It seems wonderful when we remember who she was, and what she had been; but still it was not enough to satisfy her grandiose ambitions. She conceived a still more splendid project : nothing less than a theatrical ring on modern American lines; an absolute monopoly of all the dramatic spectacles in France.

Her memorandum on the subject, addressed to the Duc de Breteuil, has been preserved. She speaks in it, not as one who sues for a favour, but as one who introduces a sound business proposition. The Opera, she points out, has, in two years, dropped nearly £24,000, which sum the City of Paris has been called upon to find. The Minister of Finance has been obliged to come to the rescue with a subsidy of £6000 a year. Very well. She will undertake to pay that subsidy herself, on the sole condition that she be allowed to form a company to take over all the theatres in the kingdom.

It was, indeed, a marvellously enterprising proposal for a woman : doubly marvellous for a woman who had come from the country with only her face for her fortune, and who now, far from being the nominee or stalking-horse of a man, was herself supplying all the brains and all the energy for her multifarious undertakings. What she would have made of the adventure if she had been allowed to carry it through one does not know. The magnitude of the scheme frightened the Government, and gave cause for hesitation. The pros and cons were balanced, and the cons seemed to preponderate. Neuville's management at Rouen, it was pointed out, had been less successful than could have been wished. Could Mlle. Montansier, it was asked, offer acceptable security for the annual

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

payment of £6000 ? Was it not the case that she had liabilities almost as considerable as her assets ? And, if that were so . . . ?

So ministers hummed and hawed ; and meanwhile the revolutionary flood which was to destroy them—but not to destroy Mlle. Montansier—was visibly and ominously gathering.

## CHAPTER XVII

Mlle. Montansier's Theatre in the Palais Royal—Her Salon attended by the voluptuaries of the Revolution—Her Performances at Brussels under the Protection of Dumouriez—Her Imprisonment during the Terror—Her Release after Thermidor.

THE King and Queen, as we all know, were carried off from Versailles to Paris by their hungry subjects in October 1789. Those members of their Court who did not accompany them emigrated, and Versailles was no longer any place for Mlle. Montansier. She was not a courtier, but a woman of business who took long views. She had looked ahead, anticipated calamity, and prepared a place to go to: a hall in the Palais Royal which she had acquired from the Duc d'Orléans, soon to be renamed Egalité. Thither she transferred her company; and she could not have found a more favourable site. The tide of fashion has since flowed westward; but the Palais Royal was then the centre of the life of Paris. The manageress owned shops there as well as her theatre; and though she did not help to keep the shops, the shops helped to keep her. Having no licence for her theatre, she took the risk of opening without one, and nothing untoward happened. The theatre was wanted; and the time was imminent when "privileges" would be done away with, and the right of opening theatres extended to all citizens without distinction.

Moreover, Mlle. Montansier was much too good a

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

woman of business to allow her theatre to become, at this stage, the battlefield of the political philosophers. The issue of the Revolution was still uncertain; it still seemed possible that the King would eventually triumph. So Mlle. Montansier professed herself of the political creed of all her clients until she saw her way to adopt the creed of the majority. At first, that is to say, she sat on the fence, entertaining all and sundry, without taking a side; and then she only descended from the fence tentatively, delicately and slowly—feeling her way in her salon before venturing to take a definite line on the stage.

It has been sardonically said that the Revolution was “made by voluptuaries”; and it is at any rate true that a good many voluptuaries were included among the makers of it, and that a considerable proportion of those voluptuaries frequented Mlle. Montansier’s receptions. At first she received them in her flat on the second floor of the café de Chartres; afterwards in the green room of the theatre; but the scene of the receptions was neutral territory on which political rivals were expected to be polite to each other. We meet the Girondins there; but we also meet Fabre d’Eglantine, Beaumarchais, Talma, Barras, Tallien, André Chénier, Camille Desmoulins, and Saint-Just. They came, not only to meet Mlle. Montansier herself—now a mature lady of sixty—but also to meet the younger actresses. It was the rôle of the actresses to keep the peace among the partisans; they succeeded, at any rate, in giving them something besides politics to quarrel about. Saint-Just, for instance, quarrelled with Vergniaud about Mlle. Rivière, the dancer; while Mlle. Sainval’s preference for Louvet brought Mlle.

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

Montansier a threatening letter from the revolutionist who prided himself on his incorruptibility :

“CITIZENESS,

“They tell me that the wit of France has taken refuge in your theatre—but it must not be exercised there at my expense. I respect your pleasures, and I require that you should respect mine. They are few enough, owing to my grave preoccupations.

“ROBESPIERRE.”

A communication which throws fresh light upon the seagreenness of the seagreen one, and indicates that there were wheels within wheels in the ferocious attitude of the Mountain towards the Gironde. Perhaps, too, we may find in it a partial explanation of the trouble which was to overtake Mlle. Montansier during the Reign of Terror.

The Terror, however, was not yet. We have only got as far as the September Massacres, the cannonade of Valmy, and the invasion of Belgium by Dumouriez; and that was the stage at which Mlle. Montansier definitely became a patriot. Her long relations with Versailles naturally made her “suspect”; and, at a time when everybody was denouncing everybody else as a traitor, she found herself accused of concealing arms, for use in a royalist rising, in her cellars—an accusation which, if followed up by a search of the premises, was more than likely to result in pillage.

She rose to the occasion, and averted the danger with a dramatic stroke. Not only did a placard on the theatre wall repudiate the offensive allegation but, at the very hour when the massacre of the suspects was proceeding in the prisons, Mlle. Montansier



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

announced that she had organised the male members of her company into a battalion of volunteers to fight the foreign foe. Actors, dancers, musicians, scene-shifters, stage-carpenters—eighty-five of them in all—they presented themselves, with Neuville at their head, at the bar of the Legislative Assembly; and Neuville read a patriotic address, demanding that they should all be sent at once to the front; while their directress, with amazing energy for a woman of sixty-three, proposed to follow them and organise theatrical performances “in the presence of the enemy.”

She did so—amid what scenes of enthusiasm one can imagine. The tide of invasion was rolled back over the frontier. Dumouriez triumphed at Jemmappes, and occupied Brussels; and then it occurred to Mlle. Montansier that a season at Brussels—subsidised if she could contrive it—would be a brilliant idea. She broached the subject in a letter which began with a happy allusion to the fact that two young women—the Mlles. Fernig—had fought for France at Jemmappes, apparelled as men, and had covered themselves with glory :

“CITIZEN MINISTER,

“The Fernig heroines fight for Liberty. I for my part want to propagate the principles and the love of Liberty. I propose to do this by means of illusion and persuasion; and I believe I can achieve a success not less signal than that obtained by our armies. I do not doubt that you will applaud my views, which I hasten to communicate to you, and for which I solicit your kind support. . . .”

And so forth—whereto the Citizen Minister replied :

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

“CITIZENESS,

“I have received your letter of yesterday’s date; and I have nothing but applause for your laudable desire to propagate in Belgium, by the powerful means at your disposal, the principles of the love of Liberty and Equality, at the time when our armies are freeing the inhabitants from the servitude beneath which they have so long been bowed.

“Your enterprise is so finely conceived that I shall not fail to exert all my personal influence to obtain you the encouragement which your zeal deserves.

“I promise, therefore, to lay your request before the Council this very morning, and I do not doubt that it will adopt the same view of it that I do myself. . . .”

With compliments, and with the practical result that Mlle. Montansier left Paris with £1000 in her treasury—voted to the citizeness “who has never failed to contribute to the growth of public spirit by the care with which she has produced at her theatre a long series of pieces, both old and new, calculated to promote patriotism and the love of Liberty.”

It was magnificent: excellent business for Mlle. Montansier if not for the French Exchequer. It was not Mlle. Montansier’s fault that the Belgians were deficient in revolutionary enthusiasm, and demonstrated their indifference by staying away from her theatre except when she tempted them by the offer of free admission. Still less was it her fault that the battle of Neerwinden compelled the French army to retreat, and that she had to send home an urgent request for more money:

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

“ We are in great straits,” she wrote, “ we who were sent here as apostles. We may have to take to flight; and, if so, what are we to do? We have not a penny among us.”

They sent her eight thousand francs, and she brought her company back to Paris; and then she delivered a balance-sheet, showing a deficit of 20,000 francs, together with the following covering memorandum :

“ Mlle. Montansier was obliged to leave behind her at Brussels six trunks full of costumes. She asks no compensation for herself; but she thinks that if the Council were to vote gratuities to the members of her company, it would be doing no more than justice to their zeal and patriotism.”

Whether the gratuities were voted or not, the bill, at all events, was paid; and Mlle. Montansier, returning to the Palais Royal, soon recouped herself for her losses. She did so well, indeed, that she moved to a larger theatre in the Rue de Richelieu—purchased by a company, which she organised, for £18,416. But that was her undoing. Robespierre, as we have seen, did not like her, but held her responsible for his failure to win the affections of a lady of her company. Danton, on the other hand, had been her friend; but Danton had been guillotined; and now, the Terror being at its height, Robespierre was virtually Dictator of Paris. He did not scruple to use his power to gratify his grudge; and he had, in Hébert and Chaumette, accomplices willing to serve him.

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

It was Chaumette who led the way, and laid the first information :

“ I denounce Citizeness Montansier for having built the theatre in the Rue de la Loi for the purpose of setting fire to the Bibliothèque Nationale. A great deal of English money was invested in the edifice, and the ex-Queen subscribed 50,000 crowns towards it. I demand that this theatre be closed on account of the danger which it would cause if it should happen to catch fire.”

Whereto Hébert, not to be outdone, made haste to add :

“ I denounce Mlle. Montansier personally. I have information to her disadvantage. I was offered a box in her new theatre if I would promise to hold my tongue. I demand that Mlle. Montansier be arrested as a suspect.”

And, forty-eight hours afterwards, Mlle. Montansier was conducted to La Force, where Neuville presently joined her.

It was the darkest hour—perhaps the only dark hour—of her fortunes. The charge against her was of the flimsiest—as is sufficiently proved by the fact that, while she was in prison, other actors were allowed to go on playing in the house which was alleged to be a source of peril to the books in the National Library ; but justice had little to do with the verdicts of Fouquier-Tinville’s Tribunal. One cannot, therefore, praise too highly the spirit with which she faced her accusers. It is true that she deceived—or tried to



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

deceive—them as to her age, declaring that she was forty-five when she was, as a matter of fact, sixty-three; but that only served them right for asking impertinent questions, and the rest verges on the sublime.

One's sole regret, indeed, is that her case was never called on for trial; so pleasant would it have been to see the Court swept by the healthy gust of her indignation. She would have made no appeal *ad misericordiam*; she would have figured as no tragedy-queen like Mme. Roland. Her attitude would have been rather that of the indignant woman who refuses to be "put upon"; who demands that the whole business of the world shall be suspended until her personal grievances have been redressed. Fouquier-Tinville's bell would have failed to silence her. She would have scolded Fouquier-Tinville with irresistible volubility, until he jumped out of his seat and fled for refuge from her tongue. The public would have got out of hand, and conducted her back to her theatre in triumph.

That is obvious from the vigour of her answers to the Commissioners appointed to examine her, and from the tone of the Memorials which she addressed to the President of the Convention, denouncing her denouncers as "a couple of unconscionable rascals, the declared enemies of all patriots"; and it may well have been as obvious to the prosecutors as it is to us. They were evidently afraid of the sexagenarian directress of the most popular theatre in Paris. So they adjourned her case from day to day, from week to week, from month to month; and then they fell out with each other. The Revolution devouring its own children, Hébert and Chaumette were sent to the guillotine by Robespierre, and



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

Robespierre took the same journey in their train on the famous ninth of Thermidor; and the prison doors were opened, and Mlle. Montansier and Neuville were able to embrace, with tears.

Her detention had not broken her spirit, and her release found her energy unabated. It was not enough for her that her character as a patriot had been cleared—she wanted damages, and she meant to have them: damages for the inconvenience she had suffered; damages for the interruption of her business; damages for the loss of her theatre, in which, during her imprisonment, the Opera had been installed. She assessed those damages at seven million francs.

“Seven millions for a theatre! Why, one could fit out seven ships of war for the sum,” exclaimed Bourdon; but other deputies took the view that the exigencies of the Naval Estimates had no bearing upon the justice of Mlle. Montansier’s claim. Rewbell, the future Director, supported her, pointing out that “the Committee of Public Safety has ruined Citizeness Montansier”; while Legendre reminded the Assembly that she had been eleven months in prison, and that her only crime had been to enrich the nation with a playhouse—“for the wealth of nations,” he concluded, “is indeed enriched by the prosperity of the arts.”

And Mlle. Montansier, as usual, gained the day. She was actually voted the sum, not of seven, but of eight million francs—and that at a time of financial depression and multifarious claims upon the Treasury. It was not quite as magnificent an indemnity as it sounded; for the payment was only made in instalments, and was made in assignats instead of cash. Still, even so, Mlle. Montansier had done uncommonly

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

well for herself. She resumed her position, under the Directorate, as the leader of theatrical frivolity in Paris. The reputation of her *foyer* was somewhat akin to that which has been associated in our own time and country with the Empire Lounge; and she had many friends among men of pleasure, and even among the members of the Directoire.

One of her friends was the great Barras; and Barras was to introduce a greater than himself.

## CHAPTER XVIII

Mlle. Montansier introduced by Barras to General Bonaparte—Engaged to be married to Bonaparte—Why the Engagement was broken off—Marriage with the Actor Neuville—Later Years.

BARRAS, whose name is one of those most commonly cited in support of the view that the Revolution was “made by voluptuaries,” was not a new friend but an old one. He and Mlle. Montansier had known each other in the old royalist days at Versailles. How intimately they had known each other is uncertain; not very intimately according to Barras himself; very intimately indeed according to other witnesses—and more especially according to the actor Fleury, of Mlle. Montansier’s company, who relates that he one day overheard them exchanging compliments :

“There is no holding you,” said Barras. “You throw your heart at the head of every man, without distinction.”

“Ah ! well. One has to do the honours of the South to the Parisians.”

“But you know what people call that sort of thing ?”

“I dare say. They give names to everything nowadays. Under Louis XIV I should have been called Ninon; but men have no sense of gratitude nowadays.”

“You want us to be grateful to you for your coquetry.”

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

“Coquetry isn’t the word. With me, this sort of thing is pure kindheartedness. I am convinced that it is one’s bounden duty to share the pleasures of life with others.”

And so forth. It is of no consequence; but it shows us that Mlle. Montansier and Barras were kindred spirits; and it prepares us to learn that he had been instrumental in obtaining her release from prison, and was now, in 1795, living in a flat communicating with her theatre, and on the friendliest terms with her. It also prepares us to find him introducing his *protégé*, the young General Bonaparte, whose “whiff of grapeshot” was presently to clear the streets of inconvenient demonstrators. And General Bonaparte, of course, was an *arriviste*: very poor, very anxious to get on, but not very clear as to the best means of doing so. He said as much to Barras, as they sat together in the Director’s apartment.

“Why not marry for money—just as people used to do under the old *régime*?” asked Barras. “Say the word, and give me time to look round, and I’ll find a wife for you.”

As he spoke, a visitor was announced, and Mlle. Montansier entered: a fine woman still—buxom and merry, in spite of her sixty-five years. The young officer was presented to her and she seemed to like him. She spoke of herself playfully as a “lonesome” woman, in spite of the fact that Neuville was still, as he so long had been, her partner in more senses than one; and the young officer replied that he was sure that any friend of Citizen Barras would be proud of the privilege of protecting and defending her. Mlle. Montansier smiled, and rejoined that perhaps she would not say “no” to such a proposal.

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

Then she withdrew, and conversation ensued between General Bonaparte and Barras :

" You see, citizen. You have engaged me in a flirtation with Mlle. Montansier. She does not look her age, you know. She is very bright; she makes herself very agreeable; she is evidently very anxious to set people at their ease."

" Cut short your compliments," said Barras with a smile. " I was advising you to marry, just now. Would you like to marry Mlle. Montansier ? "

" Citizen Representative," said Bonaparte, drooping his eyes. " That is certainly an idea worth considering. The lady's appearance is entirely in her favour. The disproportion between our ages is the sort of thing one has no time to notice in a period of revolution. But—are you quite sure that her present wealth is as genuine as her recent misfortunes ? When one thinks of such a serious matter as marriage, one must know on what sort of a foundation one is building."

Whereupon Barras undertook to sound Mlle. Montansier on the subject, and duly did so. Was she willing to marry ? he asked. By all means, she replied—it really was time that she settled down. Would she like to marry a soldier ? Yes, she was very fond of soldiers. The soldier whom Barras had introduced to her ? Well, she was old enough to be that soldier's mother, but still, all things considered, all pros and cons weighed, perhaps—she wasn't sure, but still perhaps—And her fortune ? She couldn't say to a centime ; but she would be within the mark if she put it at 1,200,000 francs. Was that enough ?



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

It was. Perhaps it was rather more than Mlle. Montansier actually possessed; certainly it was more than young General Bonaparte—who as yet was only a general of brigade—had ever dreamed of fingering. So the matter seemed as good as arranged; and Barras gave a dinner for the purpose of bringing things to a head. A most successful dinner, he assures us: a dinner at which he intercepted many amorous glances, and overheard many significant scraps of conversation, when he considerably effaced himself after the coffee had been served. It was a case of “*we will do this*,” and “*we will go there*”: a case of building castles in Corsica—where the climate, according to the young Corsican soldier, was very favourable to longevity—instead of castles in Spain.

And then came Vendémiaire; and Vendémiaire, as we all know, was the occasion on which young General Bonaparte’s “whiff of grapeshot” swept the boulevards clear of inopportune rioters, and made him the man of the hour, and so altered his sense of perspective and proportion. The man of the hour could not make himself ridiculous by marrying a woman who might certainly have been his mother, and might almost have been his grandmother. The man of the hour could look higher, and consider his inclinations as well as his prospects; and there was a way of furthering his prospects and gratifying his inclinations simultaneously. The Widow Beauharnais was charming; and Barras was willing to push the fortunes of any one who would relieve him of her. And so——

We have only the word of Barras for what happened; and it is quite likely that he does not tell the truth. He says that Mlle. Montansier gave a party to celebrate the triumph of Vendémiaire; that General

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

Bonaparte was the guest of the evening; that Junot, his aide-de-camp, arrived with a mysterious message, and carried him off from the party on a mysterious errand; that he rose and excused himself, and promised to come back later in the evening, but quite forgot to return, either in the course of that evening, or on any subsequent occasion.

Perhaps. Things may have happened with that lack of ceremony, for Bonaparte often neglected tact and ignored ceremony, though it seems, on the whole, more probable that they did not. Barras indubitably had his reasons for putting the worst complexion on anything that Napoleon did. But it seems clear, nevertheless, that Mlle. Montansier, when managing a theatre in the Rue de Richelieu, did, through the introduction of Barras, come within an ace of sitting on the throne of France. It is not the least of her titles to our interest; and her newly born desire for matrimony survived the disastrous termination of the courtship. As she could not marry Napoleon, she married Neuville, on February 6, 1800.

She was now seventy, and he was about sixty-four. He had been her partner, as we have seen, in more than one sense, for about five-and-thirty years. Uninterrupted fidelity had been no part of the bargain; but a sort of intermittent fidelity had been established by usage. If there had been a good deal to remind us of Ninon in Mlle. Montansier's early and middle periods, there was also something to remind us of Philémon and Baucis towards its close.

But the end was not yet. Neuville, indeed, died, at the age of seventy, in 1806; but his widow, though six years his senior, was to survive him by fourteen years—a marvel of energy and vigour almost to

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

the last. We find her, at the age of seventy-two, organising Opéra Bouffe in honour of Bonaparte's Italian victories—helped by a Government subsidy of 42,000 francs. At the age of seventy-seven, we find her opening yet another new theatre—the Variétés—while, at the same time, superintending a kind of Music Hall entertainment at the Palais Royal, with rope-dancing for the principal attraction. It is even said that she fell in love with one of the rope-dancers; but one does not know whether that passion was reciprocated. Probably not; for that is the date at which we get this graphic description of her from the pen of Paul de Kock :

“ A little old woman, so old, so broken down, so wrinkled, so shrivelled up, that, when I first caught sight of her, I thought I beheld the fairy Carabosse.”

That was when she was eighty-two; and one feels that she really would have done better to let the sentimental chapter close on the day on which she burst into tears over Neuville's coffin with the bitter cry :

“ Farewell, Neuville ! Farewell, my dearest ! We have both suffered much. You must forgive me, even as I forgive you.”

It was at this time—at the age of eighty-two—that she definitely retired from theatrical management; but the student of theatrical history meets her yet again—at the age of eighty-five.

The occasion was the funeral of Mlle. Raucourt—that eminent tragédienne of the Français already mentioned as the pupil of Mlle. Clairon, and the

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

instructress of Mlle. George. During her life Mlle. Raucourt had been charitable, and had allowed the clergy to be her almoners. Now that she was dead, the clergy forgot her bounties, and only remembered that the theatre was outside the Catholic pale. There were to have been prayers for her soul at Saint-Roch; but when the mourners reached the church, they found the gates locked against them. They were angry, as they had every right to be, and hot-headed as actors are very apt to be. They first tried to tear the iron gate down; and when it resisted their efforts, they scaled it, and lifted the coffin over it, and carried it into the aisle. There was a howling mob outside; and the small police force present was quite inadequate to the task of keeping order. It would have fared ill with the curé—he might even have been hanged from a lamp-post—if the King himself had not hurriedly intervened, sending a priest from his own chapel to perform the due religious offices. And, even so, the curé was not to escape altogether. A white-haired old woman, who was praying in a corner of the church, rose from her knees and hobbled towards him, and spoke :

“ ‘What!’ she exclaimed! ‘You would expel this poor woman’s dead body from your church? But when she was alive, you used to promise her, as you have promised me, that eternal bliss would be the reward of her many acts of charity. Priest, I tell you you are sowing the seeds of impiety in our hearts!’ ”

It is her last recorded utterance, and a worthy one. She had indeed climbed the ladder—and climbed it to something better than *Success in Life*. We have seen

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

her a free lover—"known to the police"; and now we see her leaning on her stick, in the dignity of honoured age, rebuking a minister of religion for his unchristian spirit, and the minister of religion standing dumb before her. One could not drop the curtain on a more effective climax.



## CHAPTER XIX

Mlle. George—Discovered and Trained by Mlle. Raucourt—*Début*  
—Admirers—Lucien Bonaparte—Prince Sapieha—The Lap of  
Luxury.

THE transition is natural from the actress whom General Bonaparte jilted to the actress whom the First Consul delighted to honour.

One has named, of course, Mlle. George. She has told a portion of the truth in her *Memoirs*; a portion, though not the whole. She wrote those *Memoirs* in her old age, when she was indigent and neglected; she looked back to the period to which they related as to a Golden Age. She remembered, indeed, many of those *petits faits vrais* which are equally valuable to the artist and to the historian; but she saw them through a shimmering haze. It seemed to her, in retrospect, that she had lived a *roman-feuilleton*—that she herself had been an *ingénue*, as the heroine of a *roman-feuilleton* ought to be. It will be necessary, even while following her narrative in the main, to correct her impressions from time to time.

Her father was a military tailor who had become the conductor of the orchestra of the Bayeux theatre. Her mother, Mme. Weimer-Verteuil, was the star of the Bayeux Troop, whom the conductor of the orchestra had married. The circumstances of her birth form an appropriately dramatic picture.

The year was 1787: a time when provincial theatres did bad business on account of the pre-

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

liminary growlings of the revolutionary tempest. On the 23rd day of February in that year, there was a perplexing commotion in the house. A messenger whispered something in the ear of the musical director; and the musical director seemed strangely perturbed. He beat time with unaccustomed and inexplicable inaccuracy; his pace got faster and faster until the singers on the stage could no longer keep up with it; finally he threw away his *bâton* and bolted from the house. What was the matter? Had he suddenly gone mad? Or had he heard that the coming revolution had come? A deputation followed him to his lodging to ascertain. Presently it returned with reassuring news; and an interesting announcement was made from behind the footlights:

“Ladies and gentlemen, it is nothing serious. The mother and child are doing as well as can be expected.”

Such is our prologue. The scene shifts to Amiens, whither the Bayeux company had removed; the time is fourteen years later. Enter Mlle. Raucourt—she of whose funeral we have just spoken as the occasion of the last dramatic act in the long life of Mlle. Montansier. Mlle. Raucourt, of the Comédie Française, was starring in the provinces; and she was in an exceedingly bad temper. She had come from Arras, where she had had a very unpleasant experience. She had played *Athalie* there; and the little Joas of the piece had been supplied by local talent. He was an exceptionally stupid and very nervous boy; and the grand manner of the great actress frightened him so much that he quite forgot that he

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

was acting. "*Comment vous nommez-vous ?*" she intoned in Racine's words. "*Mais, madame, je m'appelle Nicolas Branchu,*" the child piped out in answer; and of course the house roared, and the scene was spoiled, and Mlle. Raucourt was furious.

She feared a similar accident at Amiens, where a little girl had to be supplied by the local talent; her confidence was by no means restored when the musical director offered his daughter, aged fourteen, for the part; but after the rehearsal, her apprehensions vanished. "Fourteen in years but twenty in intelligence," was her verdict then; and after she had given her performance, she made the musical director a proposal which electrified him:

"M. Weimer, I am going to deprive you of your daughter. I propose to take her to Paris with me, and pay the entire cost of her education for the stage. I have a pension of 1200 francs at my disposal for such purposes."

It was as astonishing as the sudden appearance of the fairy godmother in *Cinderella*—and yet not entirely the result of a caprice. Mlle. Raucourt was approaching the time of her retirement, and she wanted the glorious traditions of the Français to be sustained by one whom she could claim as a pupil. To that end she had besought the influence of François de Neufchâteau, the author of *Pamela*—the piece which had got the comedians into trouble during the Terror—and now a cabinet minister. He had promised to allot a pension of 1200 francs to her nominee; and she now bestowed his patronage on the little girl who had surprised her by playing so intelligently at Amiens. And so the scene shifts

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

again, and we find ourselves first in Paris and then in Mlle. Raucourt's country house near Orléans.

The life in Paris was at first a life of poverty; for 1200 francs is only £48, and two women cannot live grandly on such an income. While the teacher gave fashionable receptions in a mansion in the Champs Elysées, the pupil, with her mother for a chaperon, lived in a furnished room in the Hôtel de Thionville, and afterwards in the Hôtel de Perou, Rue Croix-des-Petits-Champs. They did their washing at home; the mother made and mended the daughter's dresses; and they often had nothing for dinner except the vegetables which M. Weimer sent them regularly by diligence from Amiens. Presently a brother joined them—a young fiddler, who had the good fortune to obtain an engagement as music teacher in the family of the Dutch Ambassador, and contributed his earnings to the common stock; and of course they were able to go to the theatre without paying. The little girl began to be known there as Mlle. Raucourt's pupil. Her entrances in the upper circle were applauded, and she learnt to bow her acknowledgments.

She even found an admirer—*pour le bon motif*—in the actor Lafon. He proposed to marry her—presently—after her *début*; she need not decide at once—but would she not think the matter over?

“I did so” (she tells us), “and came to the conclusion that marriage would not suit my tastes. My character, I felt, was too independent. Poor Lafon! He was quite a *bourgeois* in his ways and ideas. What would he have made of me? Ah me! And what should I have made of him? The Knight of the Melancholy Countenance, I fear.”



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

A confession of a disarming candour. Already, it would seem, Mlle. George was ambitious of other laurels than those to be won on the stage; already she divined the possibilities of the career of the adventurous free lance who had the national theatre for her head-quarters. Those splendid possibilities were, in fact, paraded before her eyes in the circle in which she moved; and she was soon to have the chance of realising the truth which she had conjectured.

She was magnificently beautiful—with features of classical regularity, and a figure like that of Diana the Huntress; and her talents, if not supreme, were at least sufficient to give her beauty its full effect. Her statuesque presence, even when she was middle-aged, moved Théophile Gautier to pages of rapturous eloquence; and, at the age of seventeen, she had only to appear to conquer alike the critics and the public. Geffroy of the *Débats*—the leading critic of the day—ceased praising Mlle. Duchesnois in order to praise her. On the evening of her *début*, there was a free fight in the theatre between her partisans and those of her rival; and her champions came to her dressing-room to congratulate her—bleeding but triumphant—and carried her off to supper.

She was not rich yet, but richer than she had been; so she and her mother left their furnished lodgings and moved to a tiny flat in the Rue Sainte-Anne; another floor of the house being occupied by the workroom of Mme. Bonaparte's dressmaker. She made friends with the dressmaker's apprentices, and scampered about the streets with them when they left their work, until Mlle. Raucourt interfered and told her that that sort of thing was inconsistent with the dignity of a dramatic artist. If it be true that it was the frivolous habit of the young women to



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

play practical jokes on their neighbours by ringing their bells and then running away, there was perhaps some point in Mlle. Raucourt's observations.

Be that as it may, however, the period of irresponsible frivolity was brief. Mlle. George soon provided herself with the "indispensable luxury of a maid"; and the arrival of admirers—admirers of a very different stamp from Lafon the actor, with his *bourgeois* notions—awakened her to the fact that life was, after all, a really serious adventure :

"In the midst of all this excitement and all the successes" (she writes), "it was necessary to be careful. You can understand that there were plenty of advances—plenty of declarations. How could it have been otherwise? On the stage one always has admirers. Beautiful or ugly, one never fails to be overwhelmed by them."

Of course. That is the inevitable touch of the *ingénue* who will inveigle no man, but may perhaps, in her naïve innocence, be inveigled. We must proceed to the picture of Mlle. George as the *ingénue*, defending herself, exercising care; contriving to receive very costly presents from very wealthy men who had too much respect for her art and her ingenuousness to expect any return for their offerings beyond the satisfaction of having pleased her. The first admirer of this kind was the First Consul's brother Lucien; "the good Lucien," as the actress calls him. "In spite of his love for his wife," she writes, "I think he rather liked me."

And no doubt he did. If he had not liked her, he would not have sent her a *beau nécessaire* together with a hundred louis. Nor would he have proposed

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

to provide her with a house of her own—on condition that she lived in it without her mother—“my poor mother who was so proud and so distinguished.” One is given to understand that there was no other condition—no other expectation; that Lucien’s sole motives were friendship and love of dramatic art; that Mlle. George’s sole reason for declining the offer was her reluctance to be torn from her mother’s arms.

It is possible; and it is also possible that Mme. Bonaparte—whom Lucien at all events loved well enough to refuse to divorce her at Napoleon’s bidding—had something to say in the matter. It is also possible that nothing but the mere love of art induced Lucien, before his departure with his bride for Italy, to send Mlle. George yet another *beau nécessaire* containing yet another hundred louis, and that the visit which she paid him, to thank him for his gift, was undertaken in the same frank spirit of artistic *camaraderie*. It may even be true that, on the occasion of that visit, Lucien took the actress by the arm, and walked up and down the garden with her—“giving me a lecture on the obligations of morality.” But Lucien, unless history has been gravely unjust to him, was not, as a rule, that sort of man; and Mlle. George, who was not, on the whole, that kind of actress, seems, on reflection, to have found her mind clouded by just the shadow of a doubt:

“Oh! those men! How they love and ride away! I dare say it was with the most honourable intentions that he wished to make me happy. It is possible—for that sort of thing does happen; it is rare—but still it happens. I am going to give you a proof.”

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

Thus Mlle. George philosophises in the light of a long experience of mankind. It is her delight to remember a time when she was very naïve, and when the conduct of mankind afforded some warrant for her *naïveté*. She insists that, even if the conduct of Lucien Bonaparte did not afford that warrant, the conduct of Prince Sapieha did. He was a wealthy Pole; and the disinterested magnificence of his proceedings towards her constitutes the "proof" above referred to. The story is one which she not only wrote out for the benefit of posterity, but also related to her friends. One encounters it, not only in her *Memoirs*, but also in those of Dumas, from whose graphic narrative we may make an extract :

"The Prince" (we read) "had made inquiries at the Comédie Française. He had learnt that the *débutante* was as poor as she was virtuous, and as virtuous as she was poor. So he conceived an idea which was really worthy of a Prince: to do for a poor and virtuous young woman what is commonly done for rich and dissolute young women. He furnished an apartment for her, and he brought her the key.

"The really magnanimous feature of his proceedings was that he gave her his word of honour that the key which he handed to her was the only one. Those were times when the grand style of the aristocracy was still untainted by the commercial spirit, and such offers could be accepted in the spirit in which they were made. On the following day, George and her family settled down in the Rue des Colonnes, in Prince Sapieha's apartment. The young tragédienne found on her boudoir table a complete trousseau of magnificent cashmeres, jewels, etc.

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

“And the Prince had told her the truth, and kept his promise. Not only was there no second key to the apartment—he never entered the apartment without being formally announced like any other caller.”

We get another version of the story, with only slight differences, in Eugène de Mirecourt's sketch of Mlle. George's life. He, too, pictures the benefactions of the Prince, falling as it were from the skies, and exhibits the Prince himself in the light of a Fairy Godmother—not to say a Guardian Angel; he even undertakes to reproduce the dialogue which passed between the artist and the patron of the arts :

“‘Do not be suspicious,’ he urged. ‘Regard me as a father. This is too poor an apartment for you, mademoiselle. I have taken it upon myself to provide you with a better one. This is the address; here is the key.’

“‘But it is impossible. I cannot accept your kindness,’ stammered George.

“‘Impossible? And why impossible? Fifty thousand francs—a few dresses—a few diamonds; it is a mere bagatelle. You can very well accept that from a man who is embarrassed with an income of two million francs a year, and aspires to nothing beyond the honour of your friendship. Shake my hand when you meet me at the theatre on the night of your first appearance as Clytemnestra, and I shall be repaid a hundredfold. . . . I am your very humble servant.’

“And the Prince bowed low, and took his hat and stick, and departed. Never was a more disinterested, a more original, a more sincere homage paid to a woman's talents.”



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

Such is the legend. One can at least say of these two versions of it that they hang together—as, indeed, one would expect, seeing that they are presented by literary artists who were also men of the world, and knew that to go into too many particulars might be to reveal the chinks and weak places in the structure. But George was not a literary artist. She was the Eternal *Ingénue* with a pen in her hand and a passion for the *petit fait vrai*. Her pen ran away with her, and the details which it dropped on to the unsuspecting paper are not such as to strengthen the conclusion which the writer wishes us to draw from them.

In particular Mlle. George reveals the part played in the matter by her aunt, and by a certain Chevalier de Veuil. It happens that we know M. de Veuil, from other sources, as a man who lived by his wits and earned the greater part of his income by introducing wealthy strangers to accommodating beauties; and we can infer the character of the aunt from the fact that she was associated with him, and that of the Prince from the fact that he availed himself of such a person's services. The aunt brought M. de Veuil to call; and M. de Veuil, after expressing polite astonishment at the poverty of the actress's surroundings, asked permission to present a wealthy friend. It is a little difficult to relate that sort of thing *en ingénue*; but Mlle. George succeeds:

“My aunt urged me emphatically to accept the introduction. I suppose she was fond of Poles.

“So the Prince was presented to me. He turned out to be a man of great distinction, tall and slim, with a delicate and charming expression of countenance,



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

elegant without affectation, very simple in his manners ; a clear proof that he was, indeed, a real gentleman. He stayed only a short time, did not overwhelm me with fulsome compliments—another mark of distinction that—and obtained my permission to call again on the following day. He came, and asked permission to offer as his homage to my young talent a superb cashmere shawl, an English veil, and a necklace with a gold chain and a little pendant.”

And then, the aunt having played her part, the mother appeared upon the scene :

“ My mother said to him :

“ ‘ Sir, if it is to the *artist* that you are offering these presents, the *artist* can accept them.’ ”

And the artist did accept them ; and it presently appeared that there was no limit to what the Prince was prepared to do for the artist. He said, as M. de Veuil had said before him, that so great an artist really ought not to live in so small a lodging—that he would make it his business to see about that ; and he had a consultation on the subject with the artist’s useful aunt :

“ My aunt went house-hunting, and presently took me to 234, Rue Saint-Honoré, opposite M. Lebrun’s great house, to look at an apartment on the first floor, with a large balcony. . . . An apartment rented at 2400 francs, with a coach-house and stables.

“ ‘ My dear aunt, how perfectly lovely ! But there is no furniture ; there are no horses.’ ”

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

“ ‘ Never mind, my child. I am commissioned to buy whatever is necessary.’

“ ‘ By whom ?’

“ ‘ By Prince Sapieha.’

“ ‘ Prince Sapieha ! But I don’t particularly care for him. I can hardly accept——’

“ ‘ He knows all about that, my dear, and it makes no difference to him ; he only wants to see you lodged as you deserve to be.’

“ ‘ He wants nothing but that ! Oh ! auntie ! ’ ”

And so, reassured by that invaluable aunt of hers, she took possession of her domain, and invited her mother, as well as her aunt, to live with her ; and, on her arrival, she found yet another delightful surprise awaiting her. Not only were the rooms furnished ; the wardrobes and the chests of drawers were also full, containing everything that she could possibly need to wear from skirts and bodices down to the most intimate of undergarments. And all that merely as a tribute to an artist from a patron of the arts !

“ Such disinterested magnificence ” (Mlle. George comments) “ is rare. Still it is sometimes to be met with. I met with it ; and no doubt others have met with it also. We have all heard of people who have left money to artists in their wills. Prince Sapieha preferred to scatter his largesses during his lifetime, which is far more generous and noble.”

There is no doubt of that ; and it may also be cheerfully admitted that Mlle. George’s picture of herself, as the *ingénue* lifted into the lap of luxury, not by a

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

lover, but by a patron of the arts who asked no more than to be allowed to be her Guardian Angel, is an anticipation of Mr. Pinero's *Mind the Paint Girl* altogether beyond praise.

Nor was Prince Sapieha even her only Guardian Angel—he was only the first and the most magnificent. Guardian angels, according to Mlle. George's narrative, sprang up, at this period, on every side, laying their humble tributes at her feet, and then hovering deferentially round her. She gives a list of them; and she tells us a great deal about the delicate attentions of one of them in particular. He heard her cough, obtained leave to send her a cough mixture—and the mixture was found to consist of several cases of choice liqueurs. He also suggested that she might be able to do her beautiful hair more beautifully if she would consent to use some curl papers which he would send her—and his curl papers were bank-notes—no fewer than twenty bank-notes, each of the value of five hundred francs; and all that he sought in return for this delicate gift of £400 was permission to kiss the artist's hand.

It is idyllic: like a *tableau vivant* or allegorical ballet representing Virtue Rewarded. Contemplating it, one feels, not indeed that it is an absolutely true and faithful picture, but at least that Mlle. George had come to believe it to be so in her old age, and that her idealised recollections of it brought her youth back, and so gave her a moment's happiness in the days when she was poor and miserable.

Moreover the picture did not stand alone; and the legend which it expressed was not an isolated one. It was a part of a larger legend—a part, in fact, of the Napoleonic Legend; Mlle. George's contribution

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

to that legend being to the effect that she was still an *ingénue*—still ignorant of lovers, though cosseted in the lap of luxury—on the memorable day on which she was summoned to receive the First Consul's felicitations on her performance, in private, at Saint-Cloud.

## CHAPTER XX

Mlle. George and Napoleon—The Emperor's *Grisette*—Account of the Liaison in her *Memoirs*.

It seems that Napoleon was quite charming with Mlle. George, though he was not invariably charming with the actresses whom he summoned to divert him. He forgot his manners, for instance, according to the learned M. Frédéric Masson, with Mlle. Duchesnois, who, though she called by appointment, happened to find the First Consul too busy to attend to her.

“Tell her to wait,” he said, when his *valet-de-chambre* announced her arrival; and she waited for a couple of hours, and was forgotten. Then the valet ventured to remind his master of her presence. “Tell her to undress,” he said; and Mlle. Duchesnois did as she was told, and was again forgotten. For the third time, the valet dropped a discreet hint; but the First Consul was still occupied with the affairs of State. “Tell her to go away,” he said; and that was the end of the liaison with Mlle. Duchesnois.

No story of that sort is told about Mlle. George; and she indignantly contradicted the one story which ran somewhat on the same lines. It was not true, she said, that Napoleon pored over the map of Europe, planning his campaigns, in her society. On the contrary: *J'étais, moi, sa carte d'Europe; il connaissait très bien ma géographie*. Nor would it appear



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

that she ever even heard the story of his having said to her : " What ! You haven't taken off your stockings ? I suppose you've got ugly feet." Her delight was, rather, to think that she had kept herself an *ingénue* for him, and that he had treated her as a gallant man should treat an *ingénue*.

Moreover, she regarded his admiration of her as a matter of historical importance—a memorable event in his career as well as hers. Her pride in the incident was not affected by the fact that money had passed between them—for, of course, First Consuls should pay, and, equally of course, actresses should be paid. It seemed to her that it gave her claims, not only on the Emperor, but on the family—that it almost made her a member of the family. The time was to come when she would approach Napoleon III with an appeal for help, in the spirit of a poor relation—having, in the meantime, gloried in being a Bonapartist under the restored Bourbon *régime*. That is why one thinks of her as the *ingénue* who retained a goodly portion of her ingenuousness until the last. And yet, reading between the lines, one cannot fail to discover method in the ingenuousness.

" I had told the Prince," Mlle. George writes, " that I should like to meet the First Consul "; and the expression of that wish does seem to indicate an *ingénue* of a " coming-on " disposition. Still, when the First Consul himself made advances, there was hesitation and a fluttering of the heart; and the narrative shows Mlle. George inspired with a delightful desire to explain, and to set herself right with a possibly censorious world. She thought of Prince Sapieha, and feared that he would not like it. Disinterested benefactor though he was, he might not be so disinterested as all that : " But, in the end,

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

curiosity carried the day—or perhaps it was self-respect—how can I decide ? ”

How indeed ? And should not *amour-propre* perhaps, in this instance, be rendered “ vanity ” rather than “ self-respect ” ? And was it not vanity rather than ingenuousness which caused Mlle. George to talk about the First Consul’s proposals to her friends in the theatre, with the result that all Paris was made acquainted with her conquest, and to insist that the First Consul should send his carriage, not to her apartment, but to the theatre, to fetch her ? At all events, she did so talk, and did make that suggestion ; and the First Consul complied with the suggestion ; and the whole house manifested its enthusiasm. The piece in which she was playing that night was *Cinna* ; and a significant line, appropriately emphasised, gave the cue for the applause :

“ *Si j’ai séduit Cinna, j’en séduirai bien d’autres.* ”

Whereupon, as Eugène de Mirecourt tells us :

“ Veritable thunders of applause echoed from pit to gallery. The whole house clapped vigorously, turning towards the First Consul’s box ; and the Victor of the Pyramids did not show himself unappreciative of this novel kind of ovation.”

It was an accident, if we may believe the actress : an accident which she feared would bring calamity ; and indeed, it is not unlikely that she produced a greater effect than she had foreseen, and was, for the moment, afraid of being scolded as a babbler. But nothing of the kind happened. The time was to come when Mlle. George would talk too freely for

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

Napoleon's taste—he remembered that fact against her even in exile at St. Helena; but now he was under the spell, and the publicity pleased him. He liked the idea that his mistress should be escorted to his palace amid the plaudits of the populace.

The rest is related by Mlle. George at great length, and with much piquant detail; but readers who are avid of detail must be referred to her narrative, which is precious as a document, even if it has no great value for the serious student of history. The note of it is that refreshing ingenuousness which we have had so many occasions to remark. One finds in it none of the haughty airs of the professional beauty to whom it is a matter of course that the leaders of men shall embellish her with jewels and stuff her pocket with bank-notes. Such pride as there is in it is the pride of the *ingénue* who is abashed by her own temerity and surprised by her own success; such pride as the beggar-maid might have felt when she suddenly found favour in the eyes of King Cophetua.

At the same time, if there is an absence of pride, there is an equal absence of shame. Mlle. George, it is quite clear, took certain things for granted; that First Consuls, though married, were above the marriage laws; that it was not for an actress to remember the existence of a First Consul's wife if the First Consul himself chose to forget it. It was a common doctrine, commonly assumed at the theatre; and she knew no other public opinion. She did not therefore defy morality—she was simply unaware of it; and she was not brazen—she was an *ingénue*. She was not setting her cap at the Chief of the State, but yielding to an irresistible temptation. He must conquer her, not in the character of Chief

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

of the State, but in the humbler character of a lover. She would affect to resist, even while she yielded; and she would expect to be paid, not merely in money—though she knew the value of money—but also, and chiefly, in sentiment.

That is her picture—the reader must accept it or reject it as he thinks best. As a work of art, at any rate, it carries conviction—chiefly because it is not overdone. Napoleon is never represented in it as the slave of his mistress, the man whom she could twist round her little finger; nor does his mistress ever claim to have felt the *coup de foudre*. There is neither passion in the story, nor any suggestion of it. The atmosphere is one of gallantry—of sentiment—sometimes of playfulness. One is reminded of the way of a student with a *grisette* at the Closerie des Lilas. It may be (for anything that one can prove to the contrary) the way in which sovereigns commonly unbend when they are young; but it certainly is rare to find a Queen of Tragedy admitting that her love-affairs have been so lightly and airily conducted.

All credit to Mlle. George, therefore, for her candour! It is hard to believe that she was quite such a novice as she represents; but the novelty of her situation may nevertheless have startled her into behaving like one; and the First Consul may well have felt that her timidity, over which he triumphed, was one of her charms. There is a delightful touch in her relation of his demand that Prince Sapieha should be dismissed :

“Poor Prince! It was a sorry reward for him. He was not in love with me; his heart would not be wounded; and yet he would think me an ungrateful



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

girl. But it wasn't my fault, and I couldn't blame the First Consul. He was quite right. Any man of delicate sentiment would have acted as he did in his place."

No doubt of that; no doubt, too, that Mlle. George did as the First Consul told her—obeyed him, in fact, in all respects. He was the Man of Destiny, and she was a part of his destiny. Against destiny who shall fight—especially when it comes accompanied, not only by a gift of forty thousand francs (thrust playfully into the corsage), but also by "a heavenly smile"? Men as well as women have recorded the conquering fascination of Napoleon's smile. Mlle. George says that she resisted it for two days—which may or may not be true. It is, at any rate, certain that to the end of her life she cherished a pleasant memory of the Emperor who behaved liked a student and treated her like a *grisette*—who was capable of fits of jealousy, and played hide-and-seek with her in his bedroom—who laughingly helped her to smooth the bed and remove the traces of disorder. On the strength of those recollections she professed herself a Bonapartist after the Restoration—even in the presence of the Duc de Berry:

"Beautiful Bonapartist!" the Prince exclaimed with playful admiration.

"Yes, Prince. That is my flag, and it will always be," she replied.

And yet the memory was only the memory of a *passade*. The number of Mlle. George's interviews with the First Consul is given by Stendhal as sixteen. Her own narrative gives the impression that she saw



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

him rather oftener than that; but the duration of the liaison, in any case, was brief. There is a well-accredited story of its disturbance by an accident which caused a scandal.

On the evening of one of Mlle. George's visits, it seems, the First Consul was suddenly taken ill. He fainted, and George was frightened. She jumped up and rang the bell violently. "Quick! Run for the doctor," she cried to the servant who answered it; and the man not only ran for the doctor, but roused the palace. Mme. Bonaparte herself was alarmed. She put on her dressing-gown and hurried to the apartment, where she found her husband and his mistress *en déshabillé*—his head reposing on Mlle. George's lap. That was the *tableau* when Napoleon awoke.

"He was so furious" (says the narrator) "that he very nearly fainted a second time. The trembling actress was hustled out of the Palace; and he never forgave her for causing such a scandal."

According to another account, his anger was so violent that he ordered her to leave Paris; but that seems to be untrue. Her departure from Paris was due to another cause to which we shall come. And, of course, her own story of the rupture is simpler and sadder. We find it in Dumas' *Memoirs*:

"'For what reason did Napoleon drop you?' I asked George, one day.

"'He left me,' was her reply, 'in order to make himself Emperor.'"

The dates give colour to the statement; for the

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

rupture did, in fact, immediately precede the coronation. The desirability of avoiding scandals at such a time was obvious; and George had caused a very shocking scandal; and we have Napoleon's word for it that her talk was indiscreet. It is said that she asked him for his portrait, and that he, fearing doubtless that she would make an indiscreet use of it, handed her a piece of gold, saying: "There it is, my dear—they tell me the likeness is a good one." But George denies that story, and it may be an invention. What she tells us is that Napoleon sent for her, after having neglected her for some time, and broke the news:

"My dear Georgina, I have to tell you something which will distress you. For some time, I shall be unable to see you. What! You have nothing to say?"

"No. I quite expected it. I was not fool enough to suppose that a nobody like myself could hold any place, I don't say in your heart, but in your thoughts. I was a distraction for you—and that was all."

"You are a child, and I think it very charming of you to say that. It proves your attachment to me. I love you for loving me. Men in my position get so little love. But I shall see you again, I promise you."

"It is very kind of you, but I shall not profit by your kindness. I shall go away."

"No, no. You must not compromise your future."

"My future! I have none, and, if I have, I don't care about it. I shall go."

And so forth. She went home, and heard about the projected coronation, and understood. The next

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

time she played *Cinna* before Napoleon, and came to the memorable lines "*Si j'ai séduit Cinna*," she "gave them in a whisper, feeling the impropriety of the reference":

"The public felt it too—that refined and quick-witted Parisian public. It listened in a silence in which you could have heard a pin drop. I once more breathed freely and held up my head. The Emperor and Empress sent round messages of compliment and congratulation."

And then, a few weeks afterwards, there was a further interview in the account of which we see the *ingénue* first wrapping herself up in her dignity, and then giving way to the sentimental sorrows of the *grisette* whose student-lover leaves her to mourn in the Latin Quarter while he himself marries and settles down in the paths of provincial respectability:

"I had put on a dazzling dress for the occasion. The Emperor received me with all his old kindness.

"How beautiful you are, Georgina! And how beautifully dressed!"

"Can one be too well-dressed, Sire, when one has the honour of being received by your Majesty?"

"My dear, what airs! What language! Affectation doesn't suit you, Georgina. Behave as the frank and simple girl you used to be."

"Sire, five weeks effect a change. You have given me time to reflect, and to get out of my old habits. I am no longer the little girl I used to be. It will always be an honour to me to be received by your Majesty—but that is all. I am no longer merry. Why should I be? I am disheartened. I want change of air."

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

“ Well, he was very indulgent. His manners were perfect. He took great pains to remove my apprehensions. I listened to his kind words, but I did not trust them. I went home, feeling very angry and quite overcome. . . . An Emperor, you see, had superseded my First Consul. He was grander, and more imposing—I could no longer look for happiness in that quarter. Happiness, if there be such a thing in the world, had to be sought elsewhere.”

And Mlle. George suited the action to the word, and proceeded—after a very short interval of time—to seek happiness in Russia.

## CHAPTER XXI

Mlle. George in Russia—Unsuccessful Attempt to seduce the Emperor Alexander—Relations with Benckendorf—Departure from St. Petersburg—Visit to Jerome Bonaparte—Last Interview with Napoleon.

GEORGE'S *Memoirs* stop at the moment of her sudden departure from Paris; and her biographer may also pause to say a word about the fortunes of her manuscript.

Her idea was to make a little money out of her confessions; and she found, when she sat down to try, that she could not even confess grammatically. So she sought help :

“ I have no style. I cannot even spell. Ah me ! What a thing it is to be educated ! ”

Thus she wrote to the actor Valmore, who was the husband of Mme. Desbordes-Valmore—an actress, to be spoken of more fully in a moment, who had left the stage and was winning recognition as the greatest of the women-poets of France. Would Valmore, she asked, be so good as to put what she had written into shape ? Would Mme. Desbordes-Valmore oblige her by embellishing it with literary graces ? They promised, and they fulfilled their promises—but not entirely to George's satisfaction. There was too much Valmore in the revised version of the story; and Valmore's literary manner was of an inexpressible pomposity. George felt that she must revise his



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

revision; but she only revised a part of it, and failed to publish any of it.

Why not one can only guess. Perhaps the publishers of the Second Empire feared the consequence of drawing such pointed attention to the frivolities of the First; perhaps George found her literary labours too hard for her. At any rate the manuscript remained unprinted, and no one knew what had become of it until it turned up at an auction at the Hôtel Drouot in 1903, when it was bought by M. Chéramy, who printed it in 1908. The narrative is fairly complete and coherent down to the year 1808; but after that, there are only scattered notes—presented to us by the editor as *feuilles détachées*. And 1808 was the year of the departure, which was characteristically theatrical, and almost amounted to a mysterious disappearance.

In the April of that year, George created the part of Mandane in the *Artaxerxes* of Jean-Baptiste Delrieu—the dramatist who complained, according to the *Memoirs* of Dumas, that the management of the Français always selected for the performance of his piece the nights on which there was no money in the house. One of the nights so chosen by them was May 11; but just as the three knocks which precede the raising of the curtain were about to be given, it was discovered that Mlle. George was not in the theatre. Messengers were dispatched in haste to her apartment to fetch her; but she was no longer there. She had gone away, leaving no address, and, for two whole days, no news of her could be obtained. Then it was learnt that she had crossed the Rhine, *en route* for Vienna and St. Petersburg.

But why?

Her own detached note assigns a string of reasons.

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

She was "in debt," and she was "bored." It was a long time since she had seen the Emperor, and she wanted change of air and scene. Also "the caprice was due to an interview with Count Tolstoy, the Russian Ambassador," who provided her with a passport; but she says on the same page that she "bought the passport from a lady for a hundred louis," so that the quest for the truth in this quarter is not very hopeful. And, in other quarters, of course, we find other motives suggested. Mme. de Lieven's brother, Georges Benckendorf, had promised her marriage. That is one theory; and another is that her charms were expected to render Russia a public service by undermining the Emperor's affections for Mme. Narishkin.

The former theory derives some support from letters in which the actress boldly signs herself George Benckendorf; but the signature was only an intelligent anticipation of nuptials which were never celebrated. On the latter theory a little light is thrown by a sentence in one of the dispatches of Napoleon's Ambassador, Caulaincourt: "They tell me that the beautiful Mlle. G. . . . delivered Alexander for a moment from the enslaving chains of Mme. Narith. . . ." But that is all. One does not even know whether George was a consenting party to the projects formed for her. One only knows that, as a matter of fact, nothing came of them, and that George's triumphs at the Court of St. Petersburg were those, to adopt her own distinction, of the artist rather than the woman.

Still they were immense, whether one estimates them in terms of emoluments, of compliments, or of gifts. The salary was 16,000 roubles, together with two "benefits" which realised a further 20,000

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

roubles. The Emperor, weeping over her appearance in *Merope*, declared that that was the first time he had shed tears at the theatre. After she had played in *Semiramis*, the Emperor came to her dressing-room to congratulate her, saying : " Madame, you wear your crown with more dignity than even Catherine the Great." Whereto George replied : " Sire, the reason is that my crown is not so heavy as that of All the Russias "; with the result that the Emperor sent her a crown, exactly modelled on the one which Catherine II had worn. On another occasion the Emperor sent her a plaque of diamonds for her waistband. And the Grand Duke Constantine, the Emperor's brother, " called on her every day and loved her like a sister "; while in those *feuilles détachées* jotted down as *memoranda* for the reminiscences which were never finished, we find this entry :

" Fête given by Count Strogonof, a charming old man who adores artists and manifests his enthusiasm for them by peals of laughter. Amélie, the sister of the Empress, is at the party and places a crown on my head with her own hands. On the following day, receive from Count Strogonof a string of magnificent pearls for the crown presented to Melpomene-George.

" The Prince of Wurtemberg, brother of the Empress-Dowager, calls, instead of sending his valet, and begs me to accept a very valuable diamond ring together with a purse of red velvet and gold, stuffed with gold coins."

So that the St. Petersburg period was evidently the apogee of George's glory; for it was a finer thing to be a grand lady than to be a First Consul's *grisette*—though the *grisette* might have the clearer title to

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

a niche in the Temple of Fame. Actresses were allowed to be finer ladies in St. Petersburg than in Paris; and George was allowed to be the finest of them all. She preferred display to disorder; and as long as her admirers admired her—and endowed her—she does not seem to have cared whether they loved her or not. Her indifference in that respect was like the indifference of the tax-collector to the taxpayer. We hear of none of the violences of jealousy; and she does not even trouble to tell us for what reason she ceased to sign herself George Benckendorf. We only know that she had plenty of money, and plenty of diamonds, at the time when she ceased to do so.

She was still at St. Petersburg at the time of the Campaign of Moscow, and was still treated with consideration. Her refusal to illuminate her house in honour of the Russian victories was not resented. "She's a good Frenchwoman. Leave her alone. I certainly shan't send her to Siberia for that," said the Emperor when the omission was reported to him. None the less she decided to transfer herself and her company to Sweden, where she gave a series of performances, first at Stockholm and afterwards at Stralsund.

There, too, she was welcomed and fêted. Mme. de Staël, who was halting there on her way to England, was particularly polite to her, detailing Rocca—that second husband whom she had married as the cynics said in order to "make him an honest man"—to find her a suitable lodging, and dropping in to see her at all hours of the day; an interesting friendship in the light of what we know concerning the respective attitudes of the two women towards Napoleon. And Swedish Society (with a capital S.) opened its doors to her—though not without the expectation



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

that she would pay for the honour by reciting selections from her repertory. "Thank you for nothing," she comments. "I paid the full price for those suppers."

Finally she was received at Court; but the royal gifts of Sweden were not on the Russian scale. The Queen, in particular, seems to have impressed George as mean:

"She took from her neck an ugly little enamelled watch, and expressed the hope that I would wear it as a souvenir of her. 'It is a very modest gift,' she said; 'but what can one offer to any one who already possesses such magnificent jewels as you do?' A royal gasconnade to which I replied with an amiable smile and the inward resolution that, though I would keep the souvenir, I would take very good care never to wear anything so hideous."

The only worthy gifts, in short, came from Bernadotte, who offered pearl bracelets, fastened by diamond solitaires; and Bernadotte, of course, was a Frenchman—and he wanted George to undertake an errand for him. Would she, he asked, on her way home, deliver certain important dispatches into the hands of Napoleon's brother Jerome, the King of Westphalia?

She would and did, carrying the dispatches in her corsage, where, as an unfriendly commentator has remarked, the King of Westphalia could be relied upon to find them.

"King Jerome" (says Dumas, to whom we owe the story) "was very gallant, very handsome, and very young—only just twenty-eight years of age. He



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

expressed himself very eager to receive the communication of the Crown Prince of Sweden. I do not know whether she handed it to him or whether he discovered its hiding-place. What I do know is that the Ambassadress remained a day and a night at Brunswick. She certainly needed at least that amount of rest after so tiring a journey."

Decidedly it seemed to be George's fate to make the complete tour of the imperial family. We next find her at Dresden, reconciled to Napoleon, and playing to a *parterre* of Kings, with Talma specially summoned from Bordeaux and Saint-Prix specially summoned from Paris to support her. The reconciliation did not, indeed, imply any resumption of the old intimacy—it was the artist, not the woman, whom Napoleon welcomed back; but he welcomed the artist warmly, and restored her to her old status in the Comédie Française; for nothing is more remarkable than the interest which the Emperor continued to take in the theatre at the time when his Empire was visibly crumbling into ruins. On the very eve of the Battle of the Nations at Leipzig, he made out with his own hand the accounts for the Dresden spectacles; and it appears that they cost him no less than £4460.

Nor was he too busy to attend to theatres—and to actresses—during the Hundred Days. George sent him a message at that time, asking to be received for the purpose of communicating information of importance. "I know what she wants," he said to his confidential secretary. "She is hard up. Give her 20,000 francs." Dumas adds that he actually did receive her, and complained to her of the disgusting condition in which Louis XVIII had left his apartments in the Tuileries:

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

“ ‘You will hardly believe it, my dear, but I actually found asparagus stalks in the arm-chairs.’ ”

But that can hardly be true; for March is not the asparagus season.

Nor is it easy to believe the story that, when Napoleon was exiled to St. Helena, George proposed to accompany him. It would have been an effective gesture if she had made it; but it only rests upon the testimony of Dumas, who had an eye for effect; and it is a rare thing for an actress to make such a gesture without taking care that the whole world knows all about it. All that all the world does know for certain is that she flaunted her Bonapartism sufficiently to provoke her expulsion from the national theatre in 1817, and that she then gave a series of representations in London, and thence passed to Brussels—where she met Harel.

## CHAPTER XXII

Mlle. George and Harel—A Queen of the Romantic Movement—  
Triumphs at the Odéon and the Porte Saint-Martin.

HAREL, of the Odéon and the Porte Saint-Martin, is a familiar figure to all students of the Romantic Movement in the Theatre.

He was not great; he was not even successful; but he made his mark as a pioneer who builded better than he knew, though the building brought him to bankruptcy. He was definite, boisterous, energetic, resourceful, adaptable: a personality whom it was impossible to overlook. His mutton-chop whiskers attracted attention even in an age in which mutton-chop whiskers blossomed on men's cheeks as a matter of course; and he was also famous for washing but rarely, and for the aggressive slovenliness of his dress. But he also produced the plays of the Romantics at a time when the Comédie Française would have nothing to say to them, with George and Frédérick Lemâitre in the leading *rôles*; and his connection with the theatre was the result of his alliance with George. His association with the stage before he met her was merely that of a young man about town.

He had begun life as a politician—private secretary to Cambacérés, who was for a little while Napoleon's colleague in the consulship. In 1814, he was sub-Prefect of Soissons, and distinguished himself in the defence of that town against the Allies. During the

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

Hundred Days he was Prefect of the Landes, and distinguished himself by the zeal with which he enforced the conscription. Consequently he had many enemies; consequently he was put over the frontier when the Bourbons came back; consequently he settled at Brussels, where there were many Bonapartist exiles—Cambacérès and the painter David among the number—and earned his living by journalism; and when George came to Brussels to play, she met him.

He had already, in his man-about-town days, been the lover of Mlle. Duchesnois, who had borne him a daughter; and that fact may have weighed with George. She and Duchesnois notoriously detested each other; they had been rival competitors alike for the applause of the public and for the admiration of the Emperor. There are reasons for believing that the jealousy of Duchesnois was one of the causes of George's exclusion from the national theatre. In any case Duchesnois had triumphed in the great dramatic duel; and George may have looked upon the heart of her rival's lover as a trophy to be snatched from her. Whether she snatched at it or not, she took it, and, having taken it, she kept it. The liaison begun at Brussels was to last until Harel's death; though there is a curious uncertainty as to whether she was or was not the mother of Harel's son Tom, who is described in his death-certificate as the child of "Jean-Charles Harel and a Mlle. Weimer whose Christian name cannot be ascertained." But that, so far as the present narrative is concerned, is no great matter. We are mainly concerned with the liaison as business partnership.

It took that form almost at once; for Harel was a young man of multifarious aptitudes, and George's

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

dramatic renown was a mine fairly easy to work. He became her business manager; and she on her part persuaded her influential friends to procure him permission to return to France. For a couple of years or so they toured the French provinces together. We hear of them at places as far apart as Caen and Chambéry, always making money, and generally arousing enthusiasm. Twenty-seven sets of verses addressed to George by as many provincial poets during this period fetched forty francs at the sale of Tom Harel's effects. And then, in 1822, George obtained permission to take an engagement at the Odéon, of which theatre Harel became Director in 1829.

That was the beginning of her third great period—continued at the Porte Saint-Martin, which Harel took over from Marie Dorval's husband, M. Merle. It was also the period during which the dramatists of the new Romantic school took the French stage by storm. Marie Dorval, no doubt, is the actress whose name shines most conspicuously in the records of the fight. She had grown up with the Movement, and was a part of it in a sense in which George was not. Her triumph in Alfred de Vigny's *Chatterton* produced an electrical effect unequalled by any of George's performances; while Alfred de Vigny's passion for her is an accidental circumstance which has helped to keep her memory alive. But George was the *doyenne*; and her statuesque form was a pillar of Romanticism at a time when Marie Dorval still had her name to make. While the doors of the Français were still locked against the Romantics, she was creating parts in the plays of such men of leading among them as Vigny, Dumas, and Victor Hugo—she and Frédérick Lemâitre together.

On the whole it did not pay; the net result was



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

Harel's bankruptcy. Even before the actual insolvency there were painful incidents foreshadowing it—as when George had to strip off her jewels in the wings and transmit them to the pawnbroker, because Frédéric Lemâitre refused to “go on” without a substantial payment on account of arrears of salary due to him. Still that did not happen immediately. Harel held out until 1840; and the intermediate time, though anxious, was glorious on the boards and luxurious off them. A modern commentator has said that *La Tour de Nesle* without George was as unthinkable as is *La Dame aux Camélias* without Mme. Bernhardt; and there is no denying that Harel did his duty nobly in looking after the “notices” and keeping the press up to the mark:

“MY DEAR FRIEND,

“You cannot imagine what a hit Mlle. George made last night. She was simply magnificent. A couple of lines to that effect will oblige us very much. It will come better from you than from us.”

“MY DEAR FRIEND,

“I should be under a very great obligation to you if, in your article on my new production, you would make a point of mentioning the great hit made by Mlle. George.”

“MY DEAR FRIEND,

“The paragraph about Mlle. George, which I sent you four days ago, has not yet appeared. I send you another in case you have mislaid it.”

“MY DEAR FRIEND,

“You speak kindly—too kindly—of me in your charming article; but you have forgotten Mlle.

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

George ! Could you not insert a paragraph to repair this oversight ? I am sending you one which I should like you to print to-morrow. You will see that I have avoided all hackneyed superlatives."

" MY DEAR NEIGHBOUR,

" Once more I throw myself upon your kindness. I think I am going to score the success of the winter, if I can rely upon the support of men like yourself. I need not ask you to be sure to remember Mlle. George."

So Harel appealed to critic after critic in the best style of an insinuating press-agent; and the critics were generally responsive. Théophile Gautier in particular was repeatedly responsive. When George was fifty-two, he included her in a list of the Beauties of Paris. When she was fifty-six, he wrote of her as being " sublime as usual " and as having " electrified the house." Even when she was sixty-two he declared her " endowed with a beauty which seems to belong to a vanished race." The " good Théo," in short, was too much fascinated even to notice that George was getting fat—or, more probably, too polite to mention what he noticed. Dumas does mention the fact, though in a polished periphrasis, and continues :

" Away from the theatre, where she was always alert, George was of an incredible indolence. Of majestic stature, and fully conscious of the beauty which two emperors and three or four kings had admired, she liked to lie at full length on a large sofa, attired, if it were winter, in velvets and furs, and Indian cashmeres, or, if it were summer, in a clinging *déshabillé* of lace or muslin. So reclining, in a pose of

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

careless, easy grace, she received her callers, sometimes with the dignity of a Roman matron, sometimes with the smile of a Greek courtesan. . . .”

And then follows another picture still more graphic :

“George’s personal cleanliness was almost a proverb. She always made a preliminary toilette before taking her bath, in order not to dirty the water in which she proposed to remain for an hour. There she used to receive her intimates, fastening up from time to time, with gold pins, those long locks of hers which came undone and obliged her to lift her magnificent arms out of the water—and sometimes, not the arms only, but also a bust which seemed to have been sculptured of Parian marble.

“And—strange to relate—these proceedings, which in another woman would have seemed provocative and unbecoming, were quite simple and natural with George, reminding one of a Greek of the age of Homer or Phidias. Beautiful as a statue, she seemed as little surprised as a statue at her nudity; and I am sure she would have been amazed if a jealous lover had forbidden her to let herself be seen in her bath-room, like a sea-nymph rising from the waves, with the water dripping from her shoulders and her snow-white bosom.

“Indeed George taught the habit of cleanliness to every one who frequented her society—with the sole exception of Harel.”

And Harel was, in that regard, beyond reclaiming. He even kept a pig as a pet instead of a dog, and allowed it to make its sty in his flat. It is not

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

surprising that George decided to have it killed one day when he was out, and appealed to Dumas and Jules Janin to act as the slaughterers. Harel, it is said, wept for his loss, but recovered his calm when he remembered that, fond as he had been of his pig, he was still fonder of sausages. It is also said that George allowed her affections to be temporarily diverted from the man who kept the pig to the men who heroically volunteered to kill it; but the divagation was of no great importance. On the whole, the actress and her manager dwelt together in harmony.

They also, as has been said, dwelt together in luxury; and their careless magnificence may be illustrated by yet another of Dumas' thumb-nail sketches :

“ At this period ” (Dumas writes) “ George still possessed some splendid diamonds, including diamond buttons given to her by Napoleon and worth about twelve thousand francs each.

“ She had had them made into ear-rings; and those were the ear-rings which she preferred to wear.

“ The diamonds were so large that George frequently took them off when she got back from the theatre, complaining that they strained her ears.

“ One evening she took me home to supper with her. After supper, almonds were put on the table. George ate a great many of them, complained, while she was eating, of the weight of her diamond ear-rings, took them off, and placed them on the table.

“ Five minutes afterwards, the servant came in to brush the cloth, brushed the diamonds into a basket, together with the husks of the almonds, and threw both husks and diamonds out of the window.

“ George went to bed without thinking of the



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

diamonds, and slept peacefully—a thing which, philosopher though she was, she certainly would not have done, if she had known that her servant had pitched twenty-four thousand francs' worth of diamonds into the street.

"In the morning, her younger sister came to her room and woke her.

" 'Well! You're lucky,' she said. 'See what I've found for you.'

" 'What is it?'

" 'One of your diamonds.'

" 'Where did you find it?'

" 'In the street.'

" 'In the street!'

" 'Yes, in the street, my dear. You must have dropped it on your way home.'

" 'I can't have done that. I had them both at supper.'

" 'Are you sure?'

" 'Positive. They were worrying me, and I took them off and laid them on the table. Where on earth can I have put them after that?'

And then George *cadette* remembered the almonds, and the brushing of the cloth; and the maid was sent down to look, and there was the second diamond—lying in the gutter.

Decidedly the days in which such little accidents could happen, and be laughed over, were still days of splendour; but the end of the days of splendour was drawing near. The climax was attained with the triumph in Victor Hugo's *Marie-Tudor* in 1833. The crown which George wore in that piece fetched eighty-two francs at the sale, and is now in the Hugo Museum. But the decline was gradual. If George never



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

surpassed that success, at least she approached it a good many times in the years which followed. It was not till Harel's bankruptcy, in 1840, that she was driven back to the provinces—at the age of fifty-three. She only spent two years there, on that occasion, and then, in 1842—at the age of fifty-five—obtained a fresh engagement at the Odéon, and distinguished herself in *Britannicus*, *Merope*, *Rodogune*, *Lucrèce-Borgia*, and *La Tour de Nesle*.

But that season was in very truth the last gleam of her glory. Her younger rivals surpassed her; the hungry generations trod her down; the Parisian public ceased to applaud. At the age of fifty-six, George was driven yet again to the provinces. She was still in the provinces—aged fifty-eight—when Harel's mind gave way, and he had to be detained in an asylum; still in the provinces—aged fifty-nine—when Harel died; declining in favour even there.

And the rest of the story is pitiful: the story of a miserable old woman's desperate struggle to keep her head above water.

## CHAPTER XXIII

Death of Harel—Mlle. George in the Provinces—Decline of her Popularity—Her Poverty and her Death.

GEORGE continued in the provinces for some time after Harel's death; and a provincial playgoer gives us a melancholy glimpse of her as she appeared, at the age of sixty, at Saumur :

“ The wrinkles, the white hairs, the monstrous corpulence, the croaking utterance, the tottering walk, the broken voice, the hiccoughs of the poor actress utterly amazed her audience. Their disgust was mingled with pity. They fled from the spectacle; and the curtain was lowered in silence upon an empty hall.”

M. Jules Claretie, too, saw one of her performances as a child, and remembers how, falling on her knees, she had to be helped to her feet again—just as Gibbon had when he fell on his knees to make a declaration of love to Mme. de Montolieu. “ She lay there,” he writes, “ like an ox felled by the pole-axe, unable to stir, and when she rose she was crying with vexation ; ” but, this time, the house tried to reassure her with sympathetic applause—forgetting what she was, and remembering what she once had been—first Napoleon's *grisette*, and then the Queen of the Romantic Movement.

Another pathetic picture may be taken from Victor

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

Hugo's *Choses vues*. George called on Hugo towards the end of 1847, and poured out her sorrows :

“ ‘They have given me a pension of 2000 francs—but they don’t pay it. It is only a mouthful of bread—and I don’t get it. They offered to engage me at the Historique, but I declined. What was a fat old woman like me to do among those Chinese shadows ? What authors would write for me ? What parts could I get ? I tried what I could do in the provinces last year ; but I am helpless there without Harel. I can’t keep my company under control. So I’ve come back to Paris to see poor Harel’s grave.’ ”

Her one consolation (if it was a consolation) lay in the thought that some others who had been as great as she were now in as poor a plight. Marie Dorval, who had overtaken and passed her in the race for popularity, was now, though not yet fifty, a foundering derelict :

“ ‘She needs your pity too. They tell me she is playing for her poor livelihood in shanties at Toulouse and Carpentras. Like me, she is reduced to making a show of her poor old bald head, and dragging her wretched old carcase about on rickety stages lighted by four tallow candles, with a company of miserable mummers who come from the convict prisons, or deserve to be sent to them. It is nothing, I suppose, to you, M. Hugo, who are so rich and prosperous ; but she and I are poor miserable creatures ! ’ ”

The Comédie, however, did more for George than for Marie Dorval—at least it gave her a benefit. That benefit was the occasion of her passage-at-arms with

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

Rachel, of which there are many accounts—none of them very much to Rachel's credit. The story is told in *Rachel: Her Stage Life and her Real Life*; but one may quote here the letter to Victor Hugo in which George expressed her resentment at Rachel's message that she could not receive her but would attend to her request if she would put it in writing :

"No, thank you. I have not quite come to that. I am as much a queen of the theatre as she is. I, like her, have been a beautiful light o' love, and the day will come when she will be a poor old woman like me. No, I shall not write to her. I shall not ask her for alms. . . .

" . . . She forgets that she was once a beggar, and she doesn't dream that some day she will be a beggar again. Yes, M. Hugo, she was actually a beggar in the cafés. People threw coppers to her; and now she plays lansquenet at Véron's for louis points. . . . In thirty years' time, she won't have six farthings, and will be in the gutter, with her boots down at heel. In thirty years' time the name of Rachel won't be worth as much as the name of George. Some other girl, gifted with talent—and youth—will come up and walk over her head, and we shall see her prostrating herself humbly."

An error of prophecy; for Rachel was to die at thirty-seven, and George—an old woman of seventy—was to be one of the mourners who followed her to the grave, and to survive her for another ten years, draining the chalice of bitterness.

Not the least bitter drop in it may well have been Napoleon III's indifference to her appeal for help. She solicited an audience; but does not seem to have

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

been granted one. The new Emperor, who knew not George, had his own *grisettes*—and notably Miss Howard—to think about. They cost him a great deal of money, and he had none to spare for the withered old woman who had been the *grisette* of the founder of his family. He made her happy for a moment by giving her an appointment; but she soon found out that it was an honorary appointment, and carried no emolument. The only position at all lucrative assigned to her, under the Second Empire, as a mark of imperial favour, was that of *concessionnaire* of the lavatories at the Paris Exhibition.

She had ceased to play when she obtained that concession—but only for a year or two. She changed her mind about the Théâtre Historique, and appeared there, in *Marie-Borgia*, in 1848; and she was at the Odéon for a little while in 1849. The Français gave her another benefit in 1853—when she was sixty-six :

“She was still beautiful” (writes one who was present), “but she dragged herself about the stage instead of walking. Unable to stand upright, she was obliged, in order to recite her long monologue, to lean on the back of a chair. She heard the echo, that night, of the triumphs of long ago; but successes of that sort are always painful, marking a definite farewell to art, to work, to life. In vain, at such times, do we lay flowers at the feet of our artists. Their hearts are broken; they feel as if they were mourners at their own funerals.”

And even yet George had not quite abandoned the struggle. She still sought engagements in the suburbs; and M. Rochefort remembers seeing her at that time, one drenching winter's night, in goloshes,



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

breaking from a waddle into a trot, in order to catch the Batignolles omnibus. She was shown, too—it is almost too much to say that she played—at the Odéon in 1854, and at the Porte Saint-Martin in 1855. That was really the last appearance; and in the twelve weary years which succeeded it she took her pen and wrote, as we have seen.

She wrote those unfinished *Memoirs* which she asked Valmore and his wife to put into literary shape for her; and she also wrote these bitter sentences :

“ The public wants you no more. You may go your way—you who once stirred them to such passionate emotions. They do not care to hear you—they have forgotten you. Is your heart broken ? Is your pride humbled ? No matter. That does not concern the public—you must go away. . . . Ah ! the abominable trade ! ”

It is a hortatory, and almost a scriptural lament : the bitter cry of one who, having lived for display, and having had no inner life apart from the glitter and the glory, can, at the last, only echo the saying of the Preacher :

“ I said in mine heart, Go to now, I will prove thee with mirth, therefore enjoy pleasure; and behold this also is vanity. . . .

“ And whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them. I withheld not my heart from any joy; for my heart rejoiced in all my labour; and this was my portion of all my labour.

“ Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do; and behold all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun.”

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

And yet there was one little vanity to which George still clung even after the world's neglect of her distress and indifference to her glory had clearly taught her to know what things are vain. She died a pauper. The younger generation of actors and actresses had to subscribe to pay her funeral expenses. But her last request—which they religiously obeyed—was that, when she was laid in the coffin, her body should be wrapped in the magnificent silk robe which she had worn in *Rodogune*.

## CHAPTER XXIV

Marceline Desbordes-Valmore — Her Literary Genius and her Romantic Secret—An Actress through the Force of Circumstances—The Mysterious Lover who Loved and Rode Away—Marceline marries the Actor Valmore.

ONE passes from Mlle. George to Mme. Desbordes-Valmore, and finds oneself in quite another world, breathing quite another atmosphere.

The "effects" in George's life were, as we have seen, spectacular. She lived, almost from the cradle to the grave, as one giving a performance. The great trouble of her last years was that the performance no longer "drew"; and therefore: "Oh! the abominable trade!" She seems to have looked upon herself chiefly as a prize which gradually lost its value. One hears a great deal of the importance which other people attached to her; very little of the importance which she attached to them. The pinch of poverty and the pangs of neglect were needed to give her a genuine emotion. Not until she was soured and disappointed had her real life any reality for her. She was too vain to be capable of passion; and it is not only because she was fat that it is impossible to picture her pining away for love.

Mme. Desbordes-Valmore was a very different woman. The stage life, in her case, was always subordinated to the real life. She was *âme sensible*; and her real life had the attribute of "intensity." *Quâ* actress, she was, beyond question, the least of all the



*Mademoiselle Desbordes-Valmore.*





## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

actresses included in this gallery; and her right to a pedestal in it could be disputed on the ground that she belongs to literature rather than to the stage. Still, it was on the stage that she earned her living, when she did earn it. The theatre nurtured the greatest of the French women-poets—"the French Mrs. Browning," as a critic has called her. Born to be a poet, and condemned to be a strolling player: that is the tragedy—that, at any rate, is the chief of the tragedies—of her life.

Most actresses profess themselves passionately devoted to their art; which is no wonder in view of the flattering recognition accorded to it. Homage, as we have seen again and again in the course of these pages, is laid at the feet of actresses, while jewels are hung round their necks. They live in surroundings in which it seems as natural as it is delightful, that wealthy patrons of the drama should show their appreciation of the talents of its feminine exponents by decorating them with precious stones and entertaining them at supper; and perhaps it is only right and proper that such things should be. But Marceline Desbordes-Valmore was not an actress of that sort. She only became an actress because her family were in difficulties, and this opening occurred. She only remained an actress because she needed the salary; but she would have given the world to have been able to earn her living otherwise. Poor Marceline!

So that the theatre, in her case, supplies only the *mise-en-scène*. Her real life hinges upon her "secret"—it is she herself who calls it so: the secret which was the inspiration of her genius. She challenges us with that secret in a quatrain which reads like a riddle:

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

“Quoi ! Vous voulez savoir le secret de mon sort ?  
Ce que j'en peux livrer ne vaut pas qu'on l'envie :  
Mon secret c'est un nom ; ma souffrance la vie ;  
Mon effroi la pensée, et mon espoir la Mort.”

We will take up the challenge in a moment. Marceline carried her secret to the grave, though she spent most of her life in throwing out dark hints concerning it ; but there can be no harm in solving it now that her family is extinct, and there is no one to be wounded by the solution. We shall not have traced her steps far before we come to it.

Marceline was the daughter of a carriage painter, and was born at Douai in 1786. The Revolution brought bad times for carriage painters, whose principal clients were in flight from the guillotine ; so that the household was far from prosperous. Losing its prosperity, it ceased to be harmonious. Mme. Desbordes remembered that she had relatives (though she had not lately heard from them) in Guadeloupe, and she resolved to join them, taking Marceline with her. But first she went to Lille—which is by no means on the way from Douai to Guadeloupe—apparently for the purpose of borrowing money from a friend who lived there ; and at Lille, according to a note found among Marceline's papers, “ they lodged with a woman who had once been an actress and who advised Mme. Desbordes to put her daughter on the stage.”

That was the beginning—in or about the year 1800. Marceline—now about fourteen years of age—played, not only at Lille, but also at Bordeaux, Rochefort, Tarbes, Toulouse, and Bayonne : unable, it would seem, to raise the money to pay the fare to the West Indies. At Bayonne she and her mother found themselves stranded ; but there they met another

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

obliging landlady, who advanced them money to take them back to Douai. They spent it in going to Guadeloupe; but they had hardly landed in Guadeloupe when Marceline's mother caught yellow fever and died of it; and Marceline, failing to find the vague cousin for whom she was searching, had to return to Douai, after two years' absence, alone.

Her father was quite unable to support her, but expected her to help to support him; and there was only one way in which she could do so—by returning to the stage. She began in the Douai theatre, and then got an engagement at Rouen, where she had a very hard time which left memories, she wrote in her old age, “as hard as points of steel.” It would seem that she acted competently, and even attractively: well enough, that is to say, to accept acting as her *métier*—though not well enough, either then or afterwards, to become the idol of the hour. She got to Paris, at the end of 1804, through the introduction of some Parisian players who came to Rouen, and appeared at the Opéra Comique and the Théâtre Feydeau. Grétry, the musician, and his wife were kind. The press was friendly, commending the young actress's “simplicity” and “sensibility.”

It looked like the beginning of a normal successful career on the stage. One does not know why Marceline interrupted it to return to the provinces: probably for the sake of more prominent parts and a larger stipend. At Brussels at any rate, in 1807, she was “leading lady,” earning £192 a year; but the season was a failure, and the company was disbanded. In 1808, therefore, Marceline was once more in Paris, looking for an engagement; and instead of an engagement, she found a romance: that romance which was to be first the secret, and

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

then the sorrow of her life. A certain Mlle. Délia of her own profession introduced a friend—and lent her apartment, in order that Marceline and her friend might be alone and unobserved.

Délia, there can be little doubt, meant to do Marceline a good turn in a practical as well as a romantic sense; for Délia was a practical young woman. Her own romances enriched her; and she ultimately went to London where, it is recorded, “a lord of immense wealth protected her.” But Marceline, it must be repeated, was not that kind of actress. She did not sell her love but gave it; and her experiences were of a cruel irony. The man whom she favoured first fell in love with her because she was an actress, and then, also because she was an actress,<sup>1</sup> refused to marry her. It was the way of the world in which Marceline was living. Most actresses, like Délia, realised the fact, and reckoned with it—and sought, and found, pecuniary compensations. But Marceline did not. She merely loved her lover with single-hearted and unsophisticated intensity; and she supposed that he and his family were as unsophisticated and single-hearted as herself. She pictured her lover telling his father of the prize which he had won—and of the child which had been born as the pledge of his affection. She pictured the father delighted to hear the news, and opening his arms to a prospective daughter-in-law :

“Tu pars donc? Oui, tu veux voir ton père.  
Et dans tous les baisers d'un enfant qu'il adore  
Lui porter les baisers de *l'enfant qu'il ignore*.  
Mets sur son cœur mon cœur, mon respect, mon amour ;  
Il est aussi mon père, il t'a donné le jour.

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<sup>1</sup> He gave that reason ; but he was, as a fact, already married.



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

Partir ! Que je voudrais, invisible et hardie,  
M'asseoir sur tes genoux, près de ses cheveux blancs !  
Le toucher de mes mains, et sous tes bras tremblants,  
Contempler le mortel à qui je dois ta vie."

But that was impossible—or at all events it did not happen. Marceline's lover, instead of introducing her to his father, went away, after a passionate scene of parting, to Italy; and Marceline went to live at Rouen, hoping against hope that, in spite of the barriers which separated them, he loved her still :

"Je vous écris. . . . M'aimeriez-vous encore ?  
Si votre cœur n'est plus tel qu'autrefois,  
Faites, du moins, faites que je l'ignore ;  
S'il est constant, dites-le, je le crois.  
Je vous écris."

And—what was worse—Marceline not knowing that her lover already had a wife, believed that the barrier was the calling which she followed against her will :

"Dans ces jours où l'esprit nous apprend à charmer,  
Le cœur doit apprendre à se taire ;  
Et lorsque tout nous ordonne de plaire,  
Tout nous défend d'aimer."

Oh ! des erreurs du monde inexplicable exemple,  
Charmanle Muse, objet de mépris et d'amour,  
Le soir on vous honore au temple  
Et l'on vous dédaigne au grand jour."

An angry indictment of the despised estate in which compliment and contumely were encountered in such strange conjunction. But Marceline, though she abandoned the estate in disgust for a little while, soon had to return to it in order to live. She was back at the Odéon in 1813 : an actress who had learnt the art of drawing tears, and acquired some celebrity for pathos. "She does not play drama, she actually *is* drama," wrote one of her critics. And, at about



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

the same time, her lover returned. Evidently she had corresponded with him; and now she was willing to forgive and forget. It was her doctrine that one could love but once: that the lover who had been untrue was her predestined lover; that, unless she could win his love, she could accept none. Her verses show her beckoning him back:

“ Si c’est ainsi qu’une seconde vie  
Peut se rouvrir,

Ce soir où veille et te rêve une femme,  
Viens et prends-moi.”

The call was answered; but there was as little happiness now as before. It does not seem that there was, this time, any question of marriage. Marceline, realising the conditions of her calling, had apparently humbled herself, and was prepared to waive that point—loving sincerely, and therefore satisfied to find her happiness in love unsanctified by any Catholic sacrament. But then came a second quarrel and a second separation. There are no details enabling us to judge of the rights and wrongs of the matter. We only have the lines in which the farewell is said:

“ Je t’ai permis de trahir tes amours  
Mais moi, pour t’adorer, je serai libre encore.  
Je vais l’être toujours,  
Adieu ! mon âme se déchire.”

And that last line strikes the key-note of the rest of Marceline’s long life; her failure in love accounting alike for her great grudge against the stage, and for her continual tears. For all her poetry is one long lamentation over that failure. She lost her lover when she was about eight-and-twenty, and was still weeping for him when she was over sixty. Just as Byron dragged the pageant of his bleeding heart

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

across Europe, so she dragged the pageant of hers from one provincial playhouse to another—dragging it in the first instance, in 1815, to Brussels, where she met Valmore.

Valmore was twenty-four, and handsome. Marceline was thirty-one, and is described in an official note by an Inspector of Theatres as “faded”—likely, therefore, to be grateful to such a man as Valmore for showing admiration. They played leads together; and, after much love-making on the stage, they continued the love-making in private life. Or rather, Valmore made love, and Marceline let him do so; and the day came when he offered marriage, and she accepted him, becoming the Mme. Desbordes-Valmore whose place in French literature is assured.

But in what spirit? Her verses tell us:

“ Pour me venger d’un cruel abandon,  
Offre un autre secours à ma fierté confuse.  
Tu flattes mon ennui, tu séduis ma raison;  
Mais mon cœur échappe à ta ruse!  
Oui, prête à m’engager en de nouveaux liens,  
Je tremble d’être heureuse, et je verse des larmes.  
Oui, je sens que mes pleurs avaient pour moi des charmes,  
Et que mes maux étaient mes liens.

Et mon cœur fut créé pour n’aimer qu’une fois.”

They are lines which it must have been very disconcerting for Valmore to read as a gloss upon the love-letters which he received from Marceline. They must have made it clear to him that he had only won the remnants of a worn and withered heart. And there was worse to come—this, for example:

“ D’où sait-il que je l’aime encore?  
Il dit que l’amour sait attendre,  
Et deux cœurs mariés s’entendre,  
Et ce lien défait par lui,  
Il vient le reprendre aujourd’hui.  
Dieu! sera-t-il mon maître?”

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

Which must have meant (if it meant anything at all) that, now that Marceline was married, her lover, who was also married, had proposed a renewal of love, and that Marceline was not sure that she would have the strength to resist him. One can picture Valmore lighting upon those lines, perplexed by them, and startled into asking leading questions. Indeed, he did light upon the lines, and did ask leading questions; declaring that his "dignité d'homme" was affronted; and Marceline had to assure him that her sorrows were purely literary sorrows, and that she was singing of the troubles of her friends—Mlle. Délia and others.

But the sorrows of which she sang were her own; and it is time to identify the man who caused them.

## CHAPTER XXV

Identification of Marceline's Mysterious Lover—H. de Latouche—  
He comes again into Marceline's life after her Marriage.

INQUIRERS have speculated concerning the identity of Marceline's lover almost as earnestly as concerning the authorship of the Letters of Junius. It does not really matter, of course; the tears are more precious than their object. But the conundrum is so very easy that it would really be absurd to affect inability to guess the answer—the more so as Marceline's mysterious hints are so provocative of curiosity. The pursuit is like a game of "buried names"; and the conclusion to which it leads us is confirmed by a statement made, from "information received," by Sainte-Beuve.

The clues which Marceline gives us are these :

1. The lover was a young man of letters who contributed, in his youth, to the Keepsake Annuals of his time.

2. The lover, at a determined date, left Marceline in order to travel to Italy.

3. One of the lover's Christian names was identical with one of Marceline's own Christian names :

*"Tu sais que dans le mien le ciel daigna l'écrire ;  
On ne peut m'appeler sans t'annoncer à moi,  
Car depuis mon baptême il m'enlace avec toi."*

Now Marceline's full name was Marceline-Félicité-Josèphe; and she had a friend—Hyacinthe-Joseph-

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

Alexandre Thabaud de Latouche, commonly known as H. de Latouche; and this Latouche was a young man of letters, and he went to Italy just at the date of the departure of Marceline's anonymous lover. That is fairly strong circumstantial evidence; and the direct evidence is to be found, as has been said, in Sainte-Beuve's correspondence.

In 1838, Sainte-Beuve undertook to review Marceline's poetry for the *Revue des Deux Mondes*. According to his habit, he desired to embellish criticism with biographical detail; and he threw out his tentacles for information. Among those from whom he sought it was Ulric Guttinguer—a wealthy provincial dilettante who was intimate with Marceline's intimate friend Pauline Duchambge, the pianist; and he received this interesting reply :

“ Ah ! So you are writing about Mme. Valmore's verses. They are very pretty, and with flashes of inspiration which illuminate the darkness like lightning. You will meet in them *Le loup de la Vallée*—from whom, according to Mme. Duchambge, she has not yet recovered, and at whom are aimed all those bursts of desolated passion which place her on a different level from other women.”

And *Le loup de la Vallée* was Latouche—so nicknamed by his friends because he lived at *La vallée aux loups*. Sainte-Beuve did not use his information in his article—it would have been indiscreet to do so, at the date and in the circumstances; but he communicated it to his friends, the Oliviers of Lausanne, to whom he wrote :

“ Madame Valmore is a very charming woman,



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

when one knows her—and so naïve ! Do you know (a detail of biography) that her beautifully passionate elegies are meant for Latouche—*le loup de la vallée*—from whom, as Guttinguer tells me, she has not yet recovered.”

So there we have it—*en toutes lettres*. There is no mystery remaining; and our next task is to introduce Latouche.

He was born in 1785, at La Châtre—the George Sand country. It was he in fact who introduced George Sand to literature by taking her on the staff of the *Figaro*, employing her at the space rate of seven francs a column, and blue-pencilling her “copy” in a manner which exasperated her. “Ah ! if you knew the man !” she exclaims—an indication that he was a morose and savage editor under whom it was painful to serve.

He was, indeed, an unamiable man : brilliantly clever, but lamentably unsuccessful ; embittered by his comparative failure in life ; a wit who went out of his way to make enemies. Two practical jokes, in particular, in deplorable taste, but nevertheless amusing to read of, stand to his credit ; one of his victims being the above-mentioned Ulric Guttinguer, and the other, Chateaubriand’s friend, the Duchesse de Duras.

For the jest at the expense of Guttinguer, the opening was given by Guttinguer himself, who proposed to publish a volume of amateurish, pedestrian verse, and asked Latouche to contribute a preface. The preface which Latouche supplied was also in verse, and was a masterpiece of irony which the poet failed to see through. It was addressed “To an Amateur,” and, after many affronts

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

disguised as compliments, it ended with the masterly stroke :

“ *Publiez-les, vos vers, et qu'on n'en parle plus.*”

And Guttinguer printed that in his *Mélanges poétiques* without perceiving the mockery of it, and Paris shook with laughter.

The joke at the expense of Mme. de Duras was even more cruel. She, too, was an amateur : a novelist. It was known that she had written a novel entitled *Olivier*, and was in the habit of reading it aloud at her receptions, and intended to publish it anonymously. Latouche had the happy thought, as it seemed to him, to issue—also anonymously—an indecorous romance under the same title, in the hope that it would be attributed to the Duchess. It was attributed to her ; and the resulting scandal was such as we might expect to occur if modern England could suddenly be given reason to believe that, let us say, *Three Weeks* was the pseudonymous production of, let us say, the Countess of Warwick or the Duchess of Sutherland.

Those stories, of course, have nothing to do with Marceline ; but they show us what was the manner of the man to whom Marceline gave her love. It should be added that he was a married man, separated from his wife—though whether Marceline ever knew that he had a wife is uncertain. Most likely she did not know at first, but found out afterwards, when her heart was out of her keeping, and could not be recovered. One may guess, further, that the knowledge of the existence of the barrier between her lover and herself was one of the reasons why she was willing to marry Valmore ; and the question which next arises is : Did Valmore know ?

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

Apparently Valmore knew that his wife was a woman with a past, but did not know the details. Her child, which died at Brussels, was evidence not to be got over; and a scrap of one of Marceline's letters to him proves that her past was not regarded by either of them as a matter of no consequence :

“ Why ” (she exclaims) “ was I not worthy of you ? Why has this humiliating thought always had the most fatal influence on our married life ? ”

The answer must be—because Marceline persisted in keeping her past alive by writing poetry about it. Even though her conduct was above reproach, her poetry must have an object of reasonable suspicion. There was so much of it, all in the same vein—a perpetual reminder to Valmore that another had been more to her than he could ever be. It must have seemed pointed, in spite of Marceline's assurances that it related to nothing in particular, and that she was sad as night only for wantonness, or in sympathy for unhappy friends. One may suspect a desire to give tit for tat in Valmore's pompous confession that, once or twice when on tour, being very generally admired, he himself had been tempted and had fallen. But Valmore certainly did not know about Latouche, whom Marceline introduced to him, and who became his friend.

She introduced him within a year of her marriage, playing a comedy—for even a poet is not a *comédienne* for nothing—in order to do so without provoking questions. A common interest in literature—that was the pretence; a suitable letter—as from a stranger or a bare acquaintance—was written and shown. Perhaps Latouche threatened “ revelations ” if he

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

were not received—there are men, unhappily, who are capable of such threats; and Marceline, though she had a little genius, was quite without common-sense. Latouche, at any rate, became the friend of the family, and remained the friend of the family for twenty years; Marceline continuing, all the time, to write sorrowful poetry about the past which they shared in common. His literary advice was very useful to her.

It is an amazing situation: the unfaithful lover returning to revise the proofs of the poems relating to his own infidelity. One would not dare to picture such a thing in a novel; but it seems to have happened. Decidedly Marceline was more remarkable for “sensibility” than for common-sense. She was not one of those proud beauties—of whom one meets so many in the annals of the stage—who break lightly with the past because they are confident of the future. On the contrary, she was plain, and humble, and deemed, in the matter of love, that it was more blessed to give than to receive; and Latouche, though her lover no longer, was a part of her life which she would not willingly surrender. In spite of his infidelity, he was nearer to her own level, emotionally as well as intellectually, than Valmore; so she clung to her friendship, though it was, for twenty years, quite uneventful.

For between her and her husband there was this great gulf: that she, though a fairly good actress, never ceased to hate the stage; whereas he was a wooden, incompetent actor who believed in himself—a third-rate or fourth-rate tragedian with first-rate pretensions. He has been compared to Daudet’s “illustrious Delobelle”; but he was not quite so bad as that. If he resembled Delobelle in his pompous



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

posturings and his ludicrous incapacity, he differed from him in his willingness to tour the provinces and his ability to procure engagements. He was, in fact, though grotesque and *cabotin*, *brave homme*, and *bon père de famille*. He continued to act, believing himself to be a neglected genius, long after his wife had retired; he did not “renounce,” though he threatened to do so, even when a Rouen audience pelted him off the stage with boiled potatoes. He was most indignant at a proposal that he should leave the theatre and become a clerk; and he was quite elderly before he allowed a patron of the arts to job him into a subordinate office in the Bibliothèque Nationale.

And Marceline, conscious of great gifts, but unable to make any money out of them—hating the stage and hating the provinces—was obliged to accompany him in his peregrinations to Lyon, or Bordeaux, or wherever it might be. Her reputation, though it did not enrich her, was increasing. She was hard put to it to pay the postage on the letters which reached her from admiring readers. She was in correspondence with such leaders of literary society as Sophie Gay, and such important theatrical personages as Mlle. Mars. Literary pilgrims passing through Lyon on their way to Italy—Brizeux and Auguste Barbier, for instance—called and solicited the honour of her acquaintance. And Valmore supposed that the pilgrims had called to pay their homage to him the great tragedian; and Marceline, like a good wife, let him think so.

Such was their life together. If one could picture Mrs. Browning married, not to Robert Browning, but to Mr. Vincent Crummles, one would have an approximate idea of it. The details are of no interest. They only relate to migrations, and the struggle for



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

life—unsuccessful endeavours to get Valmore accepted in leading rôles at the Comédie Française—the occasional closing of an unprofitable theatre—the occasional reluctance of the ghost to walk : a picture which becomes increasingly pathetic as the years advance. And all this while, as a woman of forty—of forty-five—of fifty and more than fifty—Marceline continued to pour out her melodious lamentations over the love which she had lost :

“ Vous aviez mon cœur,  
Moi, j'avais le vôtre ;  
Un cœur pour un cœur ;  
Bonheur pour bonheur !

Le vôtre est rendu,  
Je n'en ai plus d'autre.  
Le vôtre est rendu,  
Le mien est perdu.

Vous me laissez là,  
Dans une vie amère ;  
Vous me laissez là,  
Et Dieu voit cela.”

And then, picturing as the abandoned like to do, the day when the lover would regret the things which might have been if only he had known where his happiness lay :

“ Savez-vous qu'un jour  
L'homme est seul au monde ?  
Savez-vous qu'un jour  
Il revoit l'amour ?

Vous appellerez  
Sans qu'on vous réponde ;  
Vous appellerez,  
Et vous songerez.

Vous viendrez rêvant  
Sonner à ma porte ;  
Ami comme avant,  
Vous viendrez rêvant.

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

Et l'on vous dira :  
' Personne—elle est morte.'  
On vous le dira ;  
Mais qui vous plaindra ? ”

And then, in another poem and another metre :

“ Malheur à moi ! je ne sais plus lui plaire ;  
Je ne suis plus le charme de ses yeux.’

It is amazing truly to think that the man at whom those lines were aimed was the friend of the family, who suggested emendations, and helped to correct them for the press. It is still more amazing to think that the woman who aimed them at him was on such terms with him that she allowed her two daughters to pay him a long visit at his country seat. But out of that visit arises another story, to be related in another chapter.

## CHAPTER XXVI

The Sufferings of Marceline—She discovers that Latouche has fallen in love with her Daughter—Termination of her Friendship with Latouche—His Death—Marceline's Old Age.

It was in 1839; and the family was widely scattered. Valmore was at Lyon, acting for dear life in order to keep the wolf from the door. Marceline was in Paris, interviewing managers on her husband's behalf and publishers on her own. The girls—Inez and Ondine—were staying with Latouche in his Valley. And then there entered to Marceline a stranger—a Veiled Lady, weeping beneath her veil, telling a pathetic story, appealing for counsel and moral support.

Her trouble, the stranger explained, was due to the behaviour of M. Latouche, and it seemed that what had happened to Marceline in the past had now happened to her. M. Latouche had loved her, and had ceased to love her, though she had borne him a child. M. Latouche had expressed himself so violently that she had been obliged to leave his house; but she still loved M. Latouche with all his faults. What had she better do? She knew that Mme. Desbordes-Valmore was his friend. He had the greatest respect for Mme. Desbordes-Valmore. If Mme. Desbordes-Valmore would speak to him, and use her great influence, she would be very grateful.

Poor Marceline! She must have felt the cruel irony of the appeal, though the crowning irony was yet to come. A woman of the world—or a proud woman, whether she was a woman of the world or

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

not—would have lifted her eyebrows in polite astonishment, and bowed her veiled visitor out. But Marceline was not a woman of the world. She was very humble, very sympathetic, very anxious to be correct and kind. So she mingled her tears with those of the Veiled Lady, and promised to do her best for her; and then she wrote to Latouche; and then there was a long and painful correspondence—a three-cornered correspondence into which Latouche dragged Valmore—at the end of which Marceline put two and two together, and divined the truth.

And the truth was terrible ! The situation was that imagined by Mr. Hardy in *The Pursuit of the Well-beloved*. The Veiled Lady had a rival—and the rival was no other than Marceline's own daughter—Ondine Valmore, a charming girl, whom Sainte-Beuve afterwards thought of marrying, then just eighteen years of age. It would have been bad enough if Latouche had loved Ondine with honourable intentions; and it seems that he loved her with dishonourable intentions—for the wife from whom he had long been separated was still alive. So, of course, Ondine and her sister had to be taken away from him, and kept away from him, though he made more than one desperate effort to recover them. He ran after the Veiled Lady in the street, and made a scene with her, declaring (or so the Veiled Lady said) that what had happened was her fault, and that he would follow her even to Hell to be avenged. As for Marceline's last glimpse of him—the last, so far as one knows—this is her record of it :

“ He came to our flat one day, and knocked and rang, again, and again, and again, for ever such a long time; but Inez was on the balcony, and had seen him

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

coming, so we did not open the door. He went away, and wrote his lady friend a furious letter; but, for the present, everything is once more quiet."

That was the end. From this time onward, the name of Latouche drops out of Marceline's letters; and it is improbable that they met again. But, even so, we are not at the end of our surprises. Marceline boasted two soul-sides. The heart of the mistress continued to be tender, even after the heart of the mother had been shocked into severity. The flow of the mistress's verse did not cease; and both the theme and the tone of it remained unchanged. It was still :

" A toi le monde ! A toi la vie !  
A toi tout ce que l'homme envie !  
A moi le ciel ! A moi le bonheur de t'aimer ! "

It was still :

" Votre nom seul suffira bien  
Pour me retenir asservie ;  
Il est alentour de ma vie,  
Roulé comme un ardent lien.  
Ce nom vous remplacera bien. . . .  
De mon cœur ôtez votre main. "

Was the love now merely literary—merely a " subject," like another—a subject to which Marceline clung because she needs must write, and could find no other subject ? One can hardly help thinking so; and yet there is a letter of hers—to Sainte-Beuve—which almost proves the contrary : a letter written just after Latouche's death, in reply to Sainte-Beuve's request for information to be used in an obituary article :

" *March 18, 1851.*

" My overwhelming grief has prevented me from



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

replying to you—pray forgive me. I have made several attempts; but what chance does my laborious life give me of recovering my composure in solitude?

“Think! It is practically by the side of a grave that I have to marshal my troubled thoughts. How can I criticise him there? What judgment can I frame for you while the tears are in my eyes? . . .

“ . . . Life often seemed a trouble and an oppression to him; and when he lost his illusions, how intense was his bitterness at the awakening from his transitory delight! The need to admire was, I think, his ruling passion; for he was often ill, and very unhappy. No, no. He wasn't a bad man—he was a sick man. The discovery of a single fault in one of his idols threw him into the depths of dejection—one can say that without exaggeration. That was his case when we knew him. He never spoke of it openly in our conversations, in which he engaged, no doubt, to distract his thoughts from a tempestuous past. I can imagine no character more mysterious than his. And yet, such was his charm, such his gentleness and sincerity, that my uncle, to whom he was much attached, and who was a religious and straightforward man, thought him simple, frank, and affectionate. And so he was! Yes, so he was!”

There is more; but that suffices to show the tone. It was written eleven years after the breach related, and shows how incapable Marceline was of breaking old ties or shaking herself clear of old memories. Love, we gather from it, was as necessary to Marceline as food and air; and the thing which she valued in love was not vehemence of passion, but sentiment, and the constant call for the warm tears of sensibility. If love is, for some people, a kind of madness, it was

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

for her a kind of servitude; and she was a slave who hugged her chains. We have seen her stooping to play a comedy in order to resume them; and our last glimpse of her reveals her still wearing them in secret after she had made the gesture of throwing them away—still asking, “Who will console me?” still crying :

“Ô mes amours d'enfance ! Ô mes jeunes amours ! ”

It matters because she had genius—and because suffering was the soil from which the works of her genius sprang. That was the price which she paid—and that was the reward which she won—for her intensity, simplicity, and single-heartedness.

The suffering never ceased—she reached no Land of Beulah. The blows continued to fall on her—blow after blow. Her daughters died—Inez when little more than a child, and Ondine, who had been a governess, after only two years of married life. Her brother died—a miserable old man who lived, partially on her bounty, in an almshouse at Douai. Her sisters—whose husbands had been bankrupt tradesmen—died; and she wrote to Pauline Duchambge :

“Listen to my story. I have been to the church to arrange for the burning of eight wax candles, as humble as myself. They represented the eight souls of my soul—father, mother, brothers, sisters, children. I sat and watched them burn, and I thought that I should die. But that is a secret for you—it was a visit that I paid to God.”

And now Pauline was her only surviving friend : Pauline who knew her story, and had told it to

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

Guttinguer, who had told it to Sainte-Beuve. And that Pauline did really know it, and had not merely pretended to know, appears from one of Marceline's last letters to her, written at the age of seventy :

“ You know very well that, apart from, and I may even say in the midst of, the sacred ties which hold me to life, you stand alone as my woman friend. There is no one else whom I love with my whole heart and soul. Unable to offer you worldly wealth—for I have none myself—I have made you a present of the mystery of my life. No doubt I have saddened your life; but I think I have developed the rich mine of your goodness to me.”

The letter was sent from one woman's bed of sickness to another's. It ends with a promise to “ make a great effort to get well ” in order to bring help and comfort in person. But that was not to be. Marceline was still on her sick bed when Pauline died; and then Marceline lost the desire to live.

She closed the door, denied herself to her acquaintances—for she had no friends left—and waited for death to come. It was painfully long in coming—she waited for it, in silence and solitude, for more than a year. But it came at last, in July 1859—“ ever so gently,” as old Homer has it : the one gentle experience in a life full of storms and troubles.

## CHAPTER XXVII

Talma—Studies Dentistry in London—Practises Dentistry in Paris—Dentist to the Duc de Chartres—Correspondence on the subject with his Father—Goes on the Stage—Admitted to the Comédie Française—Triumphs in *Charles IX*—Obliged to leave the Comédie Française on account of his Political Opinions.

THE name of Talma still imposes itself as Talma himself was able to impose it in his lifetime. Le Kain may or may not have been as great an actor—it is not for a generation which has seen neither of them to decide; but the name of Talma stands a test which that of Le Kain fails to stand. One can, if one thinks superficially and in a hurry, think of the French theatre without thinking of Le Kain; one can no more think of it without thinking of Talma than one can think of the English theatre without thinking of David Garrick. His name, like Garrick's, is the one inevitable name; he himself, like Garrick, stands out as the chief representative man. In his case, as in Garrick's, what survives is not merely the memory of a brilliant popular entertainer, but the personality of a salient character. His age, that is to say, accepted him—and we also must accept him—not merely for what he did, but also for what he was.

Circumstances, of course, helped him. His period was one in which an actor had a better chance than ever before of shining as a social figure. Actors then participated, for the first time in France, in those Rights of Man which the Revolution had affirmed; and Napoleon regarded the theatre with a very different eye from the Bourbons. He ranked acting



*Fulmine*





## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

among the arts and conceived of playgoing, not as the empty diversion of an idle hour, but as a part of education. "Tragedy," he said to Goethe, "should be the school of Kings and peoples"; and to one of his confidants he said: "Tragedy elevates the soul and kindles the emotions. It can, and should, create a race of heroes. If Corneille were alive, I would make him a Prince."

There was a point, no doubt, at which he drew the line. He never decorated a French actor—restrained, as he said at St. Helena, by "the caprices and ridiculous prejudices" of the French nation; he specifically pronounced actors ineligible for membership of the Institut de France; and he even re-enacted some of the disciplinary regulations of his predecessors on the throne. But the spirit of his attitude was quite different from that of the Bourbons. As a young man, he had been within an ace of marrying an actress, as we have noted; as First Consul he ordered the Archbishop of Paris to detain a curé for three months in a Seminary as a punishment for refusing religious rites to the body of an opera dancer; and, as Emperor, he took actors as he found them, and treated them as men and not as Court buffoons. Talma was the actor who made the most signal use of his opportunities.

He and the Emperor were old friends. In the impecunious days when Napoleon was an "olive-complexioned officer of artillery," hanging about the Palais Royal, looking out at one and the same time for a job and a wife with money, Talma used to give him passes for the pit; and the friendship thus begun in adversity was continued in prosperity. It is probably untrue, though it has often been stated, that the actor coached the Emperor in imperial deportment.

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

Talma himself always strenuously denied the story, declaring that Napoleon was born with the bearing of an Emperor, and needed no hints on the subject from any histrion. His social position, none the less, though he could not be given the red ribbon of the Legion of Honour, was grander than that ever conquered by any other actor before or after him. It has recently been discovered—a new fact that, not mentioned even in M. Frédéric Masson's *Napoléon et sa famille*—that he made love to Napoleon's sister. And he climbed to that social and artistic pinnacle from—dentistry.

The gulf to be bridged was greater in those days than it is in ours. Dentists, in the eighteenth century, did not yet rank with doctors, any more than chiropodists rank with doctors at the present time. The best qualified of them were of no more account than those unqualified practitioners who nowadays put false teeth in their windows and false advertisements in the newspapers. The elder Talma was a man of that class, though one of the best and most conscientious of them, and patronised by royalty. He practised in London, where he was Dentist to the Prince of Wales; he had a brother who was to rise to the dignity of Dentist to the King of the Belgians; he meant his son to be a dentist too. His vision of Success in Life was a vision of Success in Dentistry. *Travaillez les bouches* was a maxim always on his lips; and it was very hard to convince him that a dentist's son could achieve glory elsewhere than in a dental surgery. So he summoned his boy to London to be trained in dentistry, and raised loud lamentations over his ineptitude :

“ He is a clumsy fellow,” he said. “ I shall never

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

be able to teach him even to draw a tooth properly. He seems to have neither taste nor talent for our art."

Indeed, the young Talma's tastes had already turned in the direction of the more agreeable art in which he was to shine, as is related in the *Mémoires* of Mlle. Flore. At his preparatory school, he and a schoolfellow amused themselves by rehearsing *Andromaque*. They might have done so with impunity if they had not taken down the dining-room curtains and used them as theatrical costumes. As it was they were caught and punished corporally; but in Talma, at all events, the passion for the stage was not even scotched by the experience. He found opportunities of reciting in private houses in London—there was even some question of his going on the English stage; but he returned to Paris without making that plunge, and even set up in practice as a dentist in the Rue Mauconseil. His father, in 1785, was still writing him letters of good advice, based on the assumption that he must either succeed in dentistry or fail in life :

" You tell me that the Duc de Chartres has allowed you to call yourself his dentist. There are no emoluments attached to that honour, and it would be purchased too dearly if it obliged you to settle in the Palais Royal. . . . Honorific distinctions of that sort neither inspire confidence nor bestow talent. Such things can only be acquired by long years of practice. At your present age you can only recommend yourself to the public through your connection with a well-known firm. . . .

" You hope, you say, to have a great many foreigners for your clients, because a great many

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

foreigners are to be seen in the Palais Royal. You are quite mistaken. Possibly you might pick up a few clients in that way; but you would gain no advantage comparable with that which you derive from your association with the old surgery in the Rue Mauconseil.

“Don’t imagine that your title and your sign-board will suffice by themselves to lure people into your surgery. Nothing but professional skill will induce them to entrust you with the care of their teeth.”

Excellent advice no doubt for an old dentist to give to a young one—but advice, nevertheless, which was not of the faintest use to Talma, whom the flare of the footlights was already attracting like a beacon. He was making friends among actors, and taking lessons at a School of Elocution, with Fleury, Dugazon, and Molé for his instructors. His teachers arranged for him to make his *début* in November 1787, first at the Théâtre Doyen, and then, after an interval of a few days, at the Comédie Française; and the press pronounced him a credit to his professors :

“The *début* of young M. Talma gives us a very favourable opinion of the methods of training adopted at the school. Naturally endowed with an agreeable presence, the *débutant* has a sonorous and sympathetic voice, and a clear and distinct elocution. Free from affectations, he feels, and makes his audience feel, the harmony of the verses. His bearing is simple and his movements are natural. Above all, he plays in good taste and without mannerisms. He imitates no other actor, but plays in his own style, as his own instinct prompts him. Those are the conditions essential to sincerity and originality. . . .”



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

After that, of course, Talma felt that a dental surgery, whether in the Rue Mauconseil or in the Palais Royal, was no longer any place for him. So far as he was concerned the public might, for the future, attend to their own teeth. He on his part had other work to do; and even his father, converted by the "notices," accepted the new situation, and exhorted his son to try to become supreme as an actor as insistently as he had before exhorted him to try to become supreme as a dentist :

"If I sometimes opposed your project, that was only because I was aware of certain consequences which might possibly have ensued from it. An actor, unless he can become a Garrick, a Dufresne, a Le Kain, or a Molé, lives a wretched life and gets little esteem from the public. I trust, therefore, that you will live up to the examples of these great men who have contributed so much to our pleasure. Then you will rise to their level, and be liked and admired by every one. . . . Lord Harcourt is delighted with your success, of which he heard from the papers, and has charged me to convey his compliments."

And the excellent dentist went into details, giving his actor-son hints as to his carriage on the stage, and holding up to his admiration the best model that he knew :

"If only you had seen Mr. Garrick ! He depicted every character to the life. He was an actor from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head. Every movement that he made was a part of the picture. I did not need to know his language in order to understand him."

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

That in the early days when it was still uncertain whether the first successes would be crowned by more signal triumphs. Doubt was no longer possible, and exhortation no longer necessary, after Talma's appearance, in 1790, in Marie-Joseph Chénier's *Charles IX*. The public then recognised him, even if his colleagues did not, not only as a great actor, but as the greatest. The Revolution, of course, had by that time begun; and it was an incident of the Revolution which first made Talma prominent, not merely as an actor, but as an individual whose personality, as well as his performances, must be reckoned with.

It was at the time of the Feast of Pikes—the celebration of the first anniversary of the capture of the Bastille. The majority of the actors sympathised with the reactionary party. Consequently, when the Federals from Provence asked to be gratified by a revolutionary entertainment, they made excuses. They wished, they said, to appease, not to inflame, popular sentiment; and when the house clamoured for *Charles IX*—dedicated by its author “to an emancipated people”—they put up the acting-manager to say that that piece could not be produced owing to the indisposition of Saint-Prix and Mme. Vestris. That was Talma's opportunity.

He had no right to interpose. Though entrusted with leading rôles, he was a very junior member of the company; and it was a grave offence against discipline for any actor to address the audience from the stage—an offence for which, in the old days, they used to be sent to For L'Evêque. But Talma, nevertheless, stepped forward, demanded silence, and spoke :

“Gentlemen, it is quite true that Mme. Vestris is

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

ill; but she will willingly show her respect for you and her zeal in your service by playing in spite of her illness. As M. Saint-Prix cannot take the part of the Cardinal, it shall be read; and you shall have *Charles IX.*”

They had it, on a riotous evening on which Danton, not yet a celebrity, was arrested for disorderly behaviour; and Talma awoke the next morning to find himself a personage—cold-shouldered by his comrades, but the idol of the *sans-culottes*.

The tide of feeling set so strongly against him in the national theatre that, though he had Mirabeau for one of his backers, he was obliged to withdraw from it. Consequently he was not a member of that company, but was adding to his laurels in the Théâtre de la Liberté, at the time when the Jacobins swooped down on the Comédie Française, carried the actors off to one prison and the actresses to another, and kept them under the shadow of the guillotine, on the charges of “determined incivism” and “insults to patriots.” And the laurels which he gained were not only theatrical, but social also. He had a salon, of which Carlyle gives us a vivid glimpse in his account of Dumouriez’s visit to Paris, after the victory of Valmy—“lauded and feasted, paraded in glittering saloons, flood of beautifullest blonde-dresses and broad-cloth-coats flowing past him in admiring joy”:

“One night, nevertheless, in the splendour of one such scene, he sees himself suddenly apostrophised by a squalid, unjoyful figure, who has come in *uninvited*, nay despite of all lackeys; an unjoyful Figure! The Figure is come ‘in express mission from all Jacobins,’

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

to inquire sharply, better then than later, touching certain things: 'Shaven eyebrows of Volunteer Patriots, for instance?' Also 'your threats of shivering in pieces?' Also 'why you have not chased Brunswick hotly enough?' Thus with sharp croak inquires the Figure.—'Ah, *c'est vous qu'on appelle Marat*, You are he they call Marat,' answers the General, and turns coldly on his heel. 'Marat!' The blonde-gowns quiver like aspens; the dress-coats gather round; Actor Talma (for it is his house), Actor Talma, and almost the very chandelier-lights are blue; till this obscene Spectrum, smart unearthly Visual-Appearance, vanish back into its native Night."

But a salon implies, of course, a *salonnière*; and we must turn back and inquire who the *salonnière* was, and how an opera dancer, who had been the mistress of noblemen under the *ancien régime*, and was afterwards very dear to Benjamin Constant, became the first Mme. Talma, and the accredited hostess of the Girondins. Her career is one of the most amazing that one encounters in that amazing age, and sheds a very instructive light upon the manners and morals of revolutionary society in France.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

The first Mme. Talma—Her Pre-Matrimonial Adventures—The Charm of her Character—Her Salon during the Revolution—The *Rendez-vous* of the Girondins—Talma's Divorce and Second Marriage.

THE maiden name of the first Mme. Talma was Julie Carreau; and there is nothing to be said about her birth and parentage, for she is described as the child of an "amour de hasard." At the age of nine she became a stage-dancer; but her talent was not for dancing. Another dancer, whose stage name was Tristan, and whose real name was Carotte, showed her a more profitable way of living, and acted as business-agent for the allocation of her favours. She was a very competent business-agent; and Julie, thanks to the arrangements made for her, was soon in possession of an income of about 40,000 francs a year.

Thus far, of course, her career, though splendid, was vulgar—a career like those of dozens of other women of light virtue. But Julie, nevertheless, was evidently different from other women of her class. She was intelligent as well as beautiful. Somehow or other, with all her disadvantages, she acquired a good education and a polished manner, and fitted herself for the rôle, not of Phryne but of Aspasia. We find even Academicians accepting her in that character :

"She discussed with equal lucidity" (writes the Academician Arnault) "the most difficult problems



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

of politics and philosophy, and always in a manner suitable to her sex. She was neither pedantic nor frivolous; she never tried to talk like a man; but, combining grace with intelligence, she held the balance between the statesman, the man of fashion, and the philosopher, just as Aspasia did of old in the company of Alcibiades, Pericles, and Socrates."

That, when one comes to think of it, is really a wonderful testimonial for a professional beauty, born in the gutter and brought up in the ballet, to obtain from a distinguished man of letters; and it does not stand alone. Julie could almost have papered her rooms with such testimonials. It is difficult to believe that she deserved them—such letters of hers as have been preserved certainly do not confirm the reports. They are amiable, but not brilliant, and only moderately grammatical. Presumably, therefore, the impression recorded was chiefly produced through her charm and her power to please. She produced it, in her youth, on the young Vicomte de Ségur, and, in middle age—she did not live to be old—on the cynical and disillusioned Benjamin Constant.

M. de Ségur was one of her protectors in the days of her notoriety. A great deal of the secret of her attraction appears in the brief sketch of their relations contained in the recently published *Journal d'Emigration du Comte d'Espinchat*—a garrulous aristocrat who knew everybody who was anybody among the *ancienne noblesse* :

"At the height of his successes M. de Ségur fell passionately in love with Mlle. Julie, in whose house he passed nearly all his time. An accident which he met with confined him to his room for several months;

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

and the amiable Julie never left him, but nursed him with the most devoted care. Nor did her presence alarm the ladies of another class who came to call on the interesting invalid and to see their rival. Men of letters, wits, Academicians, all used to meet in this society. M. de Ségur was persuaded that his Julie would be the Ninon of her age, and neither he nor Abbé Arnaud, who playfully said that she would only be its Ninette, foresaw that the sentimental and sympathetic courtesan would become an ardent revolutionary, and the wife of Talma, an extreme Jacobin, and a captain in the National Guard."

She was affectionate, that is to say, and also sincere—as sincere and affectionate as was compatible with the position to which the circumstances of her birth and upbringing had conducted her. There was something in her of Manon Lescaut; and no one, in that age of sensibility, was sarcastic enough to style her—as a lady of the theatre who showed a similar devotion to a wealthy protector at a more brutal period was styled—*la petite sœur des riches*. Benjamin Constant did not come to know her until a later date; but his tribute may be given here as a further help towards understanding her. The notes in his *Journal Intime* are a better guide than the recollections which he published later.

"Madame Talma is a good woman," he wrote on one page of his diary. On another we read: "She is the person whom I love, not indeed the most passionately, but with the least admixture of other feelings, and the least regret." And then, at the time of her last illness:

"Passed the day and the night near Madame Talma,

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

whose end is approaching. I look on and study death. She has recovered all her faculties—her wit, her grace, her gaiety, her memory, the vivacity of her opinions. Can it be that all that will perish ? ”

And finally :

“ She is dead. It is over, for ever ! Kind and gentle friend ! I saw you die. Long time I held you in my arms. And now you are no more. My grief has been kept in suspense by the hope of saving you yet again. I saw your death without terror, for I saw nothing violent enough to destroy this intelligence of which I guard so lively a recollection. *Immortality of the soul !* Inexplicable enigma ! ”

When such things are written about a woman, the testimony of opinion overbears all facts and all inferences prompted by facts. Facts, in such a case, are almost as misleading as figures ; and the things which a woman does—being determined for her by the chapter of accidents—may be but an imperfect expression of what she was. What Julie did might have been—and indeed was—done by scores of women ; but in Julie’s case the impression is not of a woman who was degraded by doing them, but of a woman who, whatever she did, was somehow progressing from a lower to a higher incarnation. Some thought of the kind may have crossed Benjamin Constant’s mind when he wrote :

“ One clearly sees that what she has preserved of her soul is only troubled by the weakness of her body, but not intrinsically diminished. It is certain that if one could take that which makes her think and

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

speak—her mind, in a word—and all the faculties which make up that which I have loved so well, and transport it to another body, it would all live again. *Nothing is impaired.* . . . The spectacle of death on this occasion brings me ideas to which I am not prone.”

All that, however, has taken us a long way from the marriage with Talma, to whom Julie, within a fortnight of her wedding-day, bore twins who were christened Castor and Pollux. She was ten years his senior—though she described herself as twenty-four instead of thirty-four in her *acte de mariage*—and it is quite possible that he married her for her money. His spiteful royalist enemies, at any rate, did not neglect to rub in the fact that he was marrying a woman with a past. One of their sheets announced the union simply in this paragraph :

“M. Talma is engaged to be married to Mademoiselle Julie, and we read in a number of *Les Actes des Apôtres* that the said citizeness is the widow of MM. A.B.C.D., etc.”

The sentiments of the age, however, were such that that did not matter. Talma insisted upon his right as a man and a citizen to have his marriage blessed by the Church, and the clergy were compelled to conform to his wish. He even professed himself a Catholic in order to secure this triumph, though he was, in fact, in so far as he was anything, a Protestant ; and, the triumph won, he and his wife were not merely admitted to Society, but were accepted as social leaders of the revolutionary faction.

We have already taken one glimpse at their salon



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

in the Rue Chantierine, and seen Dumouriez there as an invited, and Marat as an uninvited guest. It became, in fact, a favourite *rendez-vous* of Parliamentary orators—chiefly, but not solely, of the Girondin party—the house in which the authors of the “revolution made by voluptuaries” met ladies of the theatre, and other ladies, some of doubtful, but others of unimpeachable reputation. Among the latter, Mme. Roland—untempted as yet by Buzot, and *bourgeoise* to the finger-tips—was the most conspicuous; and the former included Mme. Saint-Huberty of the Opera, presently to disappear and marry the Comte d’Antraigues, and Mlle. Contat, recently the mistress of the Comte d’Artois, who had recompensed her favours by obtaining her a licence to keep a gambling-hell.

Among the men Mirabeau was an *habitué*. He corresponded with Mme. Talma on terms almost of affection, and lent her his pamphlet, *Doutes sur la liberté de l’Escaut*. She was the “dear, good friend” of the statesman who would have saved royalty if he had lived—he knew her well enough to invite himself, and his mistress, Mme. Nehra, to supper with her. Danton also came, and vowed a vow to save her head if it should ever be in peril from the Terrorists; and some of the other guests were reformed courtiers, such as Lauzun and Besenval, and Vergniaud—“most mellifluous yet most impetuous of public speakers”—who found a former mistress, Julie Candelle, there to meet him, and Condorcet, who was disposed to prefer Mme. Saint-Huberty to his wife, and Riouffe, who escaped the doom of the Girondins, and lived to write a memorable description of their last days in prison.

It did not last very long—for those were days when



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

nothing lasted very long. Events flowed fast. New men and new ideas came to the front. *Salonières* could only "receive" at the risk of their lives; and the pillars of this particular salon were pulled down. Mirabeau, as we know, died in his bed; the tumbrils took, one after the other, Vergniaud, Mme. Roland, and Danton; Condorcet poisoned himself to escape the tumbrils; Dumouriez turned traitor and crossed the frontier; Mlle. Contat went, with the other artists of the Comédie Française, to Sainte-Pélagie; Riouffe tried to escape observation by acting unobtrusively in country theatres. That was the end of the company in which, according to Benjamin Constant, Julie "used to talk about love with all the delicacy and charm of a woman but with a man's good sense and knowledge of the world."

The dispersal of her salon, we may take it, was the end of her happiness. It left her alone with Talma, and Talma had outlived the desire to be alone with her. Each of them appears to have complained of the other's extravagance at a time when money was not very easily earned. "What should you do if I were as extravagant as you are?" Julie once asked her husband. "I should have more debts, my dear—that would be all," was his light and airy reply. But debts, after all, were not the main cause of the discord. The real trouble was that Talma was too much admired by other women—and too fond of their admiration—for Julie's happiness.

There is no need to go into details. He was the fashion, and she was ten years his senior. The reformers had made divorce easy enough to satisfy even Mr. Bernard Shaw; and the Catholic Religion, which forbids divorce, had never been professed by either husband or wife except for the purpose of defying the

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

Church to treat them as excommunicated persons. Divorce, therefore, was their obvious remedy; and they took it with a pleasing equanimity of temper. Julie described the scene in a letter to her friend Louise Fusil of the Français—the adventurous actress who afterwards made the retreat from Moscow with the Grande Armée :

“ We drove to the Town Hall ” (she writes) “ in the same carriage, chatting, all the time, of matters of no particular importance, just like people who are going for a country drive. My husband handed me out of the carriage; we sat side by side in the waiting-room; and we signed the paper as if it had been the most ordinary of legal instruments. . . . When I rose to go, he walked to the carriage door with me. ‘ I hope,’ I said, ‘ that I am not to be deprived of your society altogether. That would be too cruel. You will come and see me from time to time, won’t you ? ’ ‘ Of course I will. It will give me the greatest pleasure to do so,’ he replied with an embarrassed air. I was pale, and my voice betrayed my emotion in spite of all my efforts to control myself. At last, however, I got home, and was free to give way and cry. Pity me, for I am very unhappy.”

The friend with whom she took refuge in her unhappiness was Mme. Condorcet, the highly respectable wife of the highly respectable philosopher who used to come to her salon to bask in the smiles of Mme. Saint-Huberty—a fact of no particular importance in itself, but very illuminating to students curious to see how the Revolution disturbed the old scale of social values. Her interest in love, and the pleasure which she took in talking on that subject,

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

continued, as is shown by her letters to a certain M. Bignon, then French Secretary of Legation at Berlin. It does not appear that she was in love with him; and there is no clear indication that he was in love with her; but she wished to see love spring up in his heart, pretty much in the spirit in which she would have liked to see flowers spring up in a garden :

“ What ! Is that poor heart of yours empty and idle ? But a love affair, you know, would have embellished your sojourn in Germany. Do you mean to tell me that you haven’t been able to find any ‘ incomparable woman ’ there ? Such women are to be found in every country in the world. If you had loved less in the course of your life, you would have found scores of them there already. The women who turn men’s heads are of all races and all religions. I am sure it is not the women of Berlin who are to be blamed for your indifference. It must be your own heart which is tired and needs repose.”

In that letter, too, a good deal of the secret of the charm appears. Julie, it is evident, had got a long way from the gutter in which she was born, and had been very careful not to bring the mud of the gutter into the salon. She had learnt, in anticipation of the Romantics, to conceive of life as a work of art, and of love as the supreme instrument for the realisation of its best possibilities. One can forgive her much for that; and one can understand Benjamin Constant’s eulogies. His last tribute, paid at the side of her grave, may serve as our farewell to her :

“ I was present at the burial of Mme. Talma, with a small number of friends, who were deeply affected.

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

For a moment I feared that I should not be able to bear up through this mournful ceremony, which seemed doubly sad when I recalled the grace, the gaiety, and the kindness of heart of her who was locked up in the narrow coffin. . . . I felt grateful to the men who thus continued to show their respect to her who was no more."

But Talma was not one of those men. Talma had already taken to himself a second wife—Mlle. Caroline Vanhove, of the Comédie Française, the daughter of a drunken comedian, and the divorced wife of a drunken musical conductor; and she, too, had not been his wife long before she found reason to complain of him.

We will not meddle unnecessarily in their brawls, or inquire into the vexed question whether there were "faults on both sides." The allegation set forth in the pleadings was that Talma had not only introduced another lady to his domicile, but had also "relegated the petitioner to another part of the house." It is uncertain whether the petitioner proved her statement. The suit was adjourned in the confusion of the Hundred Days; and one does not know whether it was ever resumed, or whether the separation was ever legalised. What one does know is that, after Talma's death, his widow married again, and became Comtesse de Chalot, and that Talma himself continued to be a great social figure under all the *régimes* under which he lived.

Especially was he a great social figure when he met the Emperor's sister Pauline in the summer of 1812.





*Giulia Bernini*





## CHAPTER XXIX

Talma and the Princess—Meeting with Pauline Bonaparte at Aix-les-Bains—Flirtation—Correspondence—Talma's Passion and Pauline's Indifference.

WE need not weep for Talma. Though his Princess treated him very, very badly, there is nothing here for tears. It is possible that he shed tears—he claims to have shed them in floods in thinking of the days that were no more; but it is quite clear that they were the tears of disappointed vanity, not of a broken heart. Our story will be a study, not of passion, but of *cabotinage*: the *cabotinage* of a *cabotin* with an eye to business as well as an eye to effect.

A vain actor, as we all know, is the vainest of vain men; and Talma was the vainest of vain actors. It would have been strange if he had not aspired to strut as a Napoleon on the stage when he saw Napoleon figuring as a sort of Talma on a throne. We have rejected the story that the actor coached the Emperor in imperial deportment; but credible witnesses attest that the Emperor instinctively adopted some of the actor's mannerisms. The Emperor, too, frequently invited the actor to lunch, and kept ministers and generals waiting for their audience while he conversed with him; and we have already seen the Emperor speaking of tragedy as "the School of Kings and Peoples." It was natural, in the circumstances, that Talma should echo the sentiment and improve upon it. He did so, in a

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

letter contained in Mlle. Bartet's collection of theatrical autographs in language which anticipates the aspirations of our modern Church and Stage Guild :

" Why " (he demands) " should not the theatre be a School of Virtue analogous to the ancient Schools of Philosophy ? Socrates, the wisest of men, did not disdain to lend Euripides a helping hand with his tragedies.

" I should like to accommodate my art to the teaching of numbers of persons equally renowned for their piety and for their doctrines. But . . ." <sup>1</sup>

But there were difficulties; and one of those difficulties was Talma's personal conception of virtue, as the story to which we are coming will indicate.

It is a story of which the secret was wonderfully well kept. Even his wife seems only to have guessed at it :

" Talma " (she wrote in her *Étude sur l'Art Théâtral*) " became quite suddenly a man of good fortunes. Pursued and solicited by women in the highest ranks of society, he laid himself out to acquire this kind of notoriety, which is so fatal to domestic happiness."

No more than that; and none of Talma's biographers, and none of the social historians of the Empire—not even M. Copin, and not even M. Frédéric Masson—succeeded in reading between the lines or putting the dot's on the i's. But, all the time, the secret was awaiting discovery in a dusty

<sup>1</sup> Printed in the *Figaro*.

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

portfolio of manuscripts preserved at the Bibliothèque Mazarin, where nobody troubled to look at it.

Those manuscripts were some of Talma's papers, presented to the library by his friend Lebrun. They bore an inscription, which one would have supposed to be provocative of curiosity, in Mme. Lebrun's handwriting: "Would it not be better to destroy them? That remains to be seen." Nobody destroyed them, however, and nobody examined them until a year or two ago, when MM. Hector Fleischmann and Pierre Bart found that they consisted of Talma's drafts of letters which he had written to Napoleon's sister Pauline, the wife successively of General Leclerc and Prince Borghese, immortalised by Canova as Venus Victrix. A Venus victorious, and very cruelly victorious, in the encounter about which we have to speak!

Pauline, as is well known, was always in love—though not with her husbands—and always an interesting invalid. She spent her time in going about from health resort to health resort—from spa to spa; and wherever she went, she sought and found consolatory adventures. In the late summer and early autumn of 1813 she was at Aix-les-Bains; and there is a note of the visit in the *Mémoires* of the Duchesse d'Abrantès:

"At Aix there were not only many persons of the imperial family, but also all the people who used to follow them about. About twenty of us, as I have said, had agreed to meet at a resort which is nearly always amusing, but this year seemed likely to be very tedious on account of the princesses and queens who were there in such numbers that one could not walk up the street without meeting one of them.

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

There was every kind of royalty: reigning queens like the Queen of Spain; queens presumptive like the Princess of Sweden; ex-royalties like the Empress Josephine, and a King of the Theatre in the person of Talma, who came to Aix to drink hot water for the benefit of his health, and nearly contracted a fatal illness there."

The waters, one supposes, did not agree with him; but there is no reason to assume that his indisposition was serious. He was well enough to go to Lyon and play, and to return to Aix after he had fulfilled his engagement. A letter which he wrote to his brother-in-law, Ducis, indicates that his absence was intended to put a stop to certain rumours, which had even got as far as Paris. This is the enigmatic reference :

" I assure you I received no one except a single lady, and I received her in such a manner that none of the neighbours knew anything about it. I tell you this in strict confidence, for you will understand the trouble which might arise if people knew. What are they saying about it at Paris? Are they gossiping? For my own part, I like to believe that they are not, and that the absence of the two persons involved will have put an end to the scandal-mongering. I have heard from my wife on the subject. She tells me people *are* talking; but I do not think that can be true."

Perhaps not—it does not matter. But the allusion, obscure in itself, is obvious in the light of what we know, and is an interesting gloss on a further passage in the *Mémoires* above quoted :



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

“The poor man (Talma) was condemned, every evening, by Princess Pauline, to read Molière to us, to *make us laugh*! Talma dared not refuse the request of the Emperor’s sister. . . . But the poor fellow had more than enough of it. ‘I cannot stand it any longer,’ he said to me one day. ‘It will end by killing me. It is altogether too much of a good thing. She is driving me out of Aix; and I am very angry, for I should have amused myself very much there, if it had not been for this abominable obligation to rehearse parts with her every evening. She actually wants to learn the part of Agnès (*Ecole des femmes*) and that of Angélique (*Les femmes savantes*).’”

But that, of course, was very far from true, and was only said in order to cover up the truth. Dramatic rehearsals had been the means but not the end—no one who knew Pauline could even at the time have believed anything else; and the gossip which Talma sought to silence could hardly have reached Paris if it had not first permeated Aix-les-Bains. Having for the moment no one else to flirt with, Pauline had flirted with Talma; though no one knew how far she had gone, and Talma himself did not know how far she was willing to go. Indeed, it is probable that even Pauline left that question open. She was willing that he should write, of course—she was the sort of woman who feels that she has drawn a blank on any morning on which she does not receive a love-letter. She, too, would write—sometimes; for the matter was obviously one in which there must be a certain amount of give and take. But the rest would depend upon circumstances—upon accident—upon the ardour of other admirers. And, in any case, the romance must be secret and mysterious.

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

So all the usual apparatus of mystery was contrived; a false name; an accommodation address; a discreet and trustworthy confidential agent. The Princess, for the purposes of the post office, became Mlle. Sophie; Mlle. Sophie's letters were to be sent to an address at which they could be kept till called for; they should be called for by Ferrand, the Princess's butler; and Talma, on his part, must promise faithfully to destroy any letters which the Princess wrote him.

He seems to have done so, without much pain or compunction. His grievance, if he had formulated it, would have been, not that the letters must not be preserved, but that they were not worth preserving. He had reason to complain that they were few—that they got fewer—that their forms of expression were but imperfectly responsive to the ardour of his own communications. But that, of course, was not a discovery made in a day. At first Talma's attention was concentrated on the rendering of his own *rôle*; and it took him some time to realise that his partner was not playing up to him as he could have wished. Even when he did realise it he made excuses for her. She must be ill, or on a journey, or too closely watched, etc., etc. He was far too vain to imagine that she had only amused herself with him, and was now amusing herself with some one else. And yet the very first letter shows that there were already reasons why the course of Talma's love could not be expected to run smoothly:

“So I have left you, dearest! I am separated from you, and for ever such a long time. It was your wish; my absence was necessary to your tranquillity; I had no choice but to obey. But what a

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

sacrifice it is that you have imposed upon me ! Your goodness, the tears I saw you shed, and the balm of consolation which you poured upon my suffering heart, have failed to soften the bitterness of my regrets, though they have left me a ray of hope that you will not altogether forget me."

That was written from Geneva, where Talma was engaged to play. On his way there, he says, he had longed to be alone, in order that he might relieve his heart with tears ; but he does not forget to mention that he found an unprecedented crowd assembled to welcome him on his arrival. " If the homage of their curiosity," he writes, " has any value in my eyes, that is only because I think it may perhaps render me worthier of your affection." It must surely have seemed cruel to the actor that the answer to that was a letter, not from the Princess, but from her butler. The necessity for making excuses for Pauline's negligence was certainly beginning early in the day ; but Talma made them. " Poor little thing ! " he wrote. " How sorry I am for you ! How it distresses me to hear that you are so ill ! "

It might have distressed him still more acutely to know—what her own correspondence shows to have been the fact—that she was well enough to write to other people with her own hand ; but he proceeded, according to his lights, *se faire valoir* by dwelling upon the admiration expressed for him by the Genevese. " During the four days that I have been here," he says, " I have been overwhelmed with calls and invitations " ; and a day or two later he returns to the subject :

" Ah, dearest, if only you could have witnessed my

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

success here—the amazing admiration displayed for me by a whole town—an entire nation ! I cannot doubt that the homage which I have received would have made me dearer to you. Again and again people have invited me to visit them in their country houses. Again and again they have implored me to sail round the Lake with them. But I have declined all their invitations. I wish to visit no other scenes than those which we planned to visit together.”

A later sentence makes it clear that he has been sent away, and that he wants to be called back :

“ Dearest, there are moments when my sufferings are so intense that I can bear them no longer, and am on the point of hurrying back to Aix, to throw myself at your feet, and see you once again. Alas ! I know that that would only be to disturb your peace of mind, and invite fresh trouble. Still, if you wished it, how delighted I should be to fly to your side. Speak the word, and I will come to you to say a last good-bye. I can return to Paris by way of Aix and Lyon. The route is the same—but why should I ask such a favour ? I fear I expose myself to a refusal ; and a refusal would be very hard to bear.”

But, if she refuses to see him, surely Pauline will not refuse him a gift as a souvenir. He tells her what gifts would please him :

“ Give me a line authorising me to go to your place at Neuilly, and report to you how the works are getting on there. You might authorise me, at the same time, to take away one of the little boats from the lake. As I am going to shut myself up in my



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

country house, it will be the greatest possible pleasure to me to have a boat which once belonged to you. And your bust, too, dearest—do not forget to have it sent to me. Arrange the matter with Ferrand. I want this bust above everything else in the world. I must have it. I shall leave you no peace until you send it to me.”

But Pauline did not send the bust, and did not accord the interview. The appeal for the bust reappears again and again in the course of the correspondence; and the appeals for interviews rise to a passionate intensity :

“Dearest, you must by this time have received my letters of the 28th and 31st. I begged you in the latter to let me see you again for one moment before my departure; and I await your reply with terrible anxiety. . . . My sufferings, dearest, are the same whether I am near you or far away from you; and I implore you on my knees to accord me just one moment of your society. Alas! dearest, if it is my misfortune to fail to obtain this favour I do not know how I shall tear myself away from this neighbourhood. Grant me this moment of happiness before I have to leave you for so long. My treasure, while I am waiting the opportunity to have the lock of hair you gave me made into a bracelet, I have attached it to the tresses which you had given me before. I have wrapped them in the handkerchief which you gave me, and I wear them next my heart. And your bracelet with it—the one which you bade me take from your arm on the day of our terrible parting! You swore by your son that you would never abandon me; and I live in the sweet and



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

perfect assurance that you will be true to your promise."

But Pauline had no son. She had borne a son to her first husband, but he had died eight years before she swore that oath. One does not know whether she thought the oath on that account less binding; but she certainly did not keep it. Indeed, now that her lover was writing her letters which imperatively required answers, she still contented herself with sending messages by the butler.

And such messages! The butler was charged to invent reasons why it was undesirable for Talma to come to Aix; and of course the reasons which the butler gave were not the true ones. The real reason was a Major Duchand, who had now—more or less—taken Talma's place in Pauline's heart; but Talma knew nothing about that then; and it is doubtful whether he ever knew. He still attributed Pauline's hesitations to an exaggerated fear of public opinion; he still wrote passionately and reproachfully; he still lived in the hope that he would overcome her timidity and be allowed to see her—if not at Aix, then at Lyon, where she would break a journey which she was projecting to one of the Mediterranean health resorts :

"To my wish to see you once more he (Ferrand) replies that he is afraid people will talk; but Aix is quite empty now, and it would be quite as natural for me to return to Paris by that route as by any other. This objection which he raises, and which seems to me to be quite unfounded, makes me terribly anxious; his dread of my arrival torments me. Twenty times, at least, I have made up my mind to go to Aix, and

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

offer you my prayers and the homage of my heart without disturbing by my presence the calm of which you feel the need; but I was afraid I should not have sufficient self-command to be near you and make this sacrifice, and I was still more afraid of displeasing you, and losing your heart altogether by an inconsiderate act of which you disapproved. . . .

“ . . . Pauline, Pauline, my heart is torn to pieces. I know that you are to start on the 6th, and it is not from you that the news has reached me. I have learnt it from the public press. All the people whom I meet have been allowed to see you. Every one of them has had this pleasure. To me alone is it refused. . . .

“ Pauline, you are going, and I shall never see you more. I shall be a few days at Lyon; you will come there too; but by that time, I shall have gone. I have to flee your presence as if I were some miserable wretch who had incurred your hatred. Ah, Pauline, is there any one as unhappy as I am? No, Pauline, no one, for my sufferings are more than you can imagine, and I am in the very depths of despair. But shall I not have a line from you to-morrow, or will you not, at least, write to me at Lyon? Oh, my God! What an unhappy wretch I am!”

Whereupon Pauline relented, and promised to meet her lover at Lyon—“if circumstances permitted.”

## CHAPTER XXX

Further Correspondence—Increasing Coldness of the Princess—  
Talma consoled by Mlle. Bazire.

CIRCUMSTANCES did not permit; circumstances delayed Pauline's departure from Aix until after Talma's departure from Lyon. She stayed at Aix so long after the close of the season that it is difficult to reject the theory that she remained there in order to keep out of Talma's way: desiring his letters, indeed, in the spirit of a collector of love-letters, but dreading his presence as an embarrassment. At Lyon, she lodged in the house of her uncle, Cardinal Fesch; and a married Princess could not very well receive the addresses of a lover—especially if that lover were an actor—in a Cardinal's Palace. One cannot help suspecting Pauline of having taken refuge with the Cardinal in order to avoid her too ardent actor, who might otherwise have changed his plans and waited for her at Lyon.

So we find Talma first exalted to the heights of hope and then plunged into the depths of despair. He talks of waiting at Lyon; but his engagements prevent him from waiting long enough. If he does not see Pauline herself at Lyon, he says, at least he supposes that he will see her butler there—it will be comfort to him to have news of her from her butler's lips; but even the butler does not come in time. He is told, instead, to write to an address at Paris; but even so there crops up a difficulty which shows

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

how carelessly and casually Pauline conducted the affairs of her heart :

“ For a long time, dearest, I shall be unable to write to you—all the time that I am on my journey. Even of this pleasure—even of this consolation—I shall be deprived. You told me in your last letter to write to Paris at the address which you gave me—and *you forgot to give me the address.* Let me know, I implore you, as soon as possible, where I am to send my letters.”

And then there follows a letter, dated October 25, 1812, of which Talma made, and preserved, no fewer than four separate drafts. One does not know which of the four drafts he finally copied and dispatched; but the gist of all the four is pretty much the same. Talma has waited and waited, hoping against hope, until he can wait no longer. Pressing commands have come to him from Paris, and now he must really go. “ I leave Lyon to-day,” he says, “ with death in my heart.” He adds bitterly : “ The house in which you are to stay is one which I should not be allowed to enter. . . . My love for you, you see, is a continual penance ”; and then his attitude changes, and his tone becomes one of dignified reproach. Pauline, he evidently feels, in thus keeping him at a distance, is rejecting a pearl of great price. He has a case against her, and he sums it up with something of the impressiveness of a judge charging a jury :

“ One by one you withdraw all the promises that you made me with a tenderness which made it impossible for me to fear that you would not fulfil them. You promised that you would write to me

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

often, even if your letters were only notes; and in your last letter, which I received at Geneva, you tell me that you cannot write until you are on your way home—though we had taken our measures to avoid every possible risk. I was relying upon the gift of your bust, and you tell me that I cannot have it until one of your people goes to Paris for it. So here I am, deprived of every privilege at once. But you wish it so, and I will not complain. The deep and boundless attachment which I have vowed to you depends no longer upon either your will or mine. I do not wish to escape from it; and it is not to be altered by the sacrifices which you have imposed upon it. Farewell, my dearest friend! Farewell, you who will be my Fate until the last day of my life. But, in Heaven's name, I beg of you, even if I must not have a line of your handwriting, at least send me news by your butler. . . .

" . . . To what address am I to write after you have left Lyon? Are you going to Marseilles? Am I to know nothing whatever of your plans? Ah, dearest one!

"I have to start in an hour's time, and very likely you are now on the point of arriving. Think of the grief that that will be to me. Dearest! Dearest! Do not banish me altogether from your recollection."

That was his parting salute, after three weeks of waiting. Just three days after he had gone, Pauline arrived; and the inferences to be drawn are tolerably obvious. Pauline had her actor at the end of a string; and it was at the end of a string that she meant to keep him. She had no intention whatsoever of drawing the string towards her; and she never did



## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

so. So that Talma at last began to suspect that she was playing with him :

“ Can it be, dearest ” (we find him asking early in November), “ that your heart is now lost to me for ever ? Can it be that, after all your lavish promises, you are now absolutely indifferent to me ? Can it be that your loving and tender heart is no longer to be loving and tender to me ? To me who am so blindly devoted to you that, though I have lost all hope of your return to me, I can imagine no happiness in life without you ? ”

The answer to all these questions seems to have been in the affirmative, though Pauline was one of those women who find it very difficult to say such things in so many words. Having her lover, as has been said, at the end of a string, and turning a deaf ear to all hints that it was time for her to pull the string in her direction, she nevertheless could not steel her heart to the point of cutting the string. She kept Talma without news of her for six weeks ; but then she sent him news—though it was the butler, not she herself who wrote. It must have been very tantalising—far more so than absolute and unconditional rupture ; and at last, some time in December, it brought about—what Pauline very possibly desired—a change in the tone of Talma’s communications. The twentieth letter in the series ends :

“ Je souffre de *toi* ! ”

The twenty-first begins :

“ Que *votre* lettre m’a fait de mal ! ”

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

That is to say, the familiar style of love now begins to subside into the formal language of friendship; and Talma—to whom the butler may or may not have given a friendly hint in the matter of Court etiquette—no longer presumes to *tutoyer* the Emperor's sister. He cannot, indeed, altogether abandon the language of adoration. Pauline is still for him—on paper—"the only and eternal object of my affection," and "the best and most beautiful of women," etc., etc.; but the language of love has outlasted the reality on his side as well as on Pauline's. For him, no less than for her, there was, in fact, Another. She shall be named in a moment; but it has first to be noted that Talma was now on such terms with Pauline that he could seek to exploit her friendship for his material advantage, in the keen spirit, one may almost say, of a commercial traveller. That is why, as was said when the subject was introduced, one need not weep for him.

"My friend," he begins, "you are my sole refuge, and I am going to appeal to your affection to get me out of an intolerable situation"; and then he explains:

"As things are, it would be too much to expect that I shall continue to receive my annual present from the Emperor. If I should not receive it, I shall be terribly embarrassed by engagements which I have undertaken to meet in the course of the new year. A friend of mine is, at this moment, offering me an opportunity not only of repairing this loss, but also of assuring my independence for the future. He has offered me a considerable share in the profits of one of those licences which the Government grants for the exportation of goods to England. He has

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

just sent in his application for such a licence to the Comte de Sussy, the Minister of Commerce; but his application needs more influential support than he has so far been able to obtain for it in order to guarantee its success. It occurred to me that you would not refuse to do me a favour which means so much to me. What I want you to do is to write to M. de Sussy, the Minister of Commerce, introducing, with the strongest recommendations, M. Marguerie the Younger, merchant of Le Havre, saying that you are personally interested in the success of his petition. . . . There is no time to lose, for the petition is ready, and is about to be submitted to the Minister for his signature. Perhaps it is indiscreet of me to ask you to do me this service, but whom should I ask if not her who has been so kind to me, and to whom I should be glad to be under an obligation ? ”

Having failed in love, that is to say, Talma now aspired to succeed in business; and though he was conscious that the heart of his mistress was no longer exclusively his, he saw no reason why he should not make her useful in his commercial enterprises. All the romance has evaporated from the story when we come to that—there is a brutal and cynical candour about it to which comment could add nothing. Even Talma, for all his vanity, seems dimly to have perceived, though without completely realising, that his relations with Pauline were placed thereby upon a different footing.

He was still, in one of the remaining letters, to call Pauline his “ angel from heaven ”; but that, we may take it, was the force of habit. He was still to suggest that, as he was going here, or going there, it might be an opportunity for him to meet her; but there is

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

little of the old palpitating impatience in the suggestions. He admits in one letter that such an interview is "too much to hope for"; and in another he practically apologises for his insistence, and pointedly uses the word "friendship" instead of the word "love":

"Forgive me for all the vain dreams in which I have indulged—they have their source and their excuse in your great kindness to me, and in the irrefragable links which attach me to you for ever. I trust that your reception of me when I have the happiness of seeing you again will not entirely dissipate my illusions, and that I shall discover in your heart the friendship which you have promised to reserve for me."

And so, it would seem—to use the language in which Gibbon related the end of his own love-story—"love subsided in friendship and esteem." If human life ran on the same lines as literary art, it would be the last letter in the series. As a matter of fact, there were a few more letters, and a few more suggestions—one can hardly say appeals—for interviews. The last of them was written from Dresden, whither Napoleon had hastily summoned Talma to entertain the Grande Armée. It communicated to the Emperor's sister the tragedian's plans for a provincial tour.

"I had decided upon the south of France in the hope of seeing you for a few minutes while passing through. I was full of this project, continually thinking of it. You can imagine how I regret my inability to execute it, now that I know that you

## ROMANCES OF THE FRENCH THEATRE

would have been willing to meet me. Perhaps even now I shall not be far from you. In that case I should be full of impatience and excitement at the thought of our meeting, instead of boring myself to extinction and reflecting that I am five hundred leagues away from you."

It does not seem, however, that Talma and Pauline ever met again, or even that they continued to correspond; and there is every reason for believing that Talma did not really care, in spite of the professions which courtesy or self-respect—or whatever the motive may have been—compelled him to maintain until the last. For there is a very significant passage in one of his letters to his brother-in-law, Ducis: "I know nothing of what is happening in Paris," he writes, "and I have had no letters except from Mlle. Bazire."

And Mlle. Bazire was—the lady on whose account the second Mme. Talma sought to divorce her husband during the Hundred Days. Whence it seems clear that Talma had had no great difficulty in consoling himself for Pauline's coldness—though he had too much consideration for her susceptibilities to tell her so—and that to weep for him would indeed be a work of supererogation.

THE END



# INDEX

- ARGUILLON, Duc d', 121  
 Aissé, Mlle., 66  
 Antraigues, Comte d', 262  
 Argental, D', 46, 51, 54  
 Armand, 90  
 Arnaud, Abbé, 259  
 Arnould, Sophie, 87  
 Artus, 90  
 Augustus of Saxony, 27  
  
 Barbier, Auguste, 239  
 Barras, 160, 168-171  
 Bart, Pierre, 269  
 Bartet, Mlle., 268  
 Bauffremont, Marquis de, 104  
 Bazire, Mlle., 285  
 Beaumarchais, 82, 160  
 Béjart, Mme., 13, 16, 17  
 Bergheic, Comte de, 98  
 Bernhardt, Mme., 38  
 Besenval, Baron de, 103, 262  
 Bignon, M., 265  
 Bissy, Marquis de, 103  
 Boileau, 25  
 Bonaparte, Lucien, 145, 180-184, 197  
 Borghese, Prince, 269  
 Bouillon, Duchesse de, 57-67  
 Bouret, Siméon, 61-69  
 Bouteville, Duc de, 103  
 Breteuil, Duc de, 157  
 Brizard, 83, 85  
 Brizeux, 239  
 Brotok, Comte de, 103  
 Buscher, M. de, 118  
 By, Chevalier de, 98  
  
 Cambacérès, 209, 210  
 Candeille, Julie, 262  
 Canova, 269  
 Carotte, 257  
 Carreau, Julie, 257-265  
 Carton, Mlle., 60  
 Cartouche, 82  
  
 Chalot, Comtesse de, 266  
 Chalotais, Marquis de la, 46  
 Champmeslé, Mlle., 18, 19, 23, 24, 25  
 Chartres, Duc de, 251  
 Chaulnes, Duc de, 82  
 Chaumette, 164, 165, 166  
 Chénier, André, 160  
 Chevreuse, Duchesse de, 72  
 Cindré, Marquis de, 103, 105  
 Clairon, Mlle., 26, 82-86, 94-101, 105-146, 151, 174  
 Clavel, 41, 42, 43  
 Condorcet, 262, 263, 264  
 Constant, Benjamin, 256, 258, 259  
 Cophetua, King, 194  
 Copin, M., 268  
 Corneille, M., 10, 11, 18, 26, 125, 249  
 Cosse, Marquis de, 149  
 Craven, Countess of, 129-133  
  
 Dangeville, Mlle., 96, 108  
 Danton, 164, 263  
 Dauberval, 83, 84, 85  
 Délia, 228, 232  
 Desbordes-Valmore, Mme., 201, 224-243  
 Desmares, Mlle., 25  
 Desmoulins, Camille, 160  
 Desplaces, Major, 98  
 Dorival, Mlle., 91  
 Dorothea, Sophie, 52  
 Dorval, Marie, 211, 219  
 Dubarry, Mme., 87  
 Dubois, 83, 84  
 Duchambge, Mme., 234  
 Duchand, Mme., 276  
 Duclos, Mlle., 28, 34, 44, 62  
 Duchesnois, Mlle., 181, 191, 210  
 Dugazon, 252  
 Dumas, 211, 213, 215

# INDEX

- Dumesnil, Mlle., 95, 101  
Dumouriez, 161, 162, 255, 262  
Duras, Duchesse de, 85, 235, 236  
Eglantine, Fabre d', 160  
Enclos, Ninon, 25  
Epinay, M. d', 79  
Favart, Mme., 26, 27, 71-79  
Fernig, Mlle., 162  
Ferrand, 275, 276  
Ferriol, Mme. de, 48, 54  
Feuillade, 90  
Fitz-James, Count, 85  
Fleury, Bailli de, 103, 107, 169, 252  
Flore, Mlle., 251  
Florent, 90  
Foix, Marquis de, 90  
Fontaine, La, 25  
Fouquier-Tinville, 166  
Galitzin, Princess, 111  
Garrick, David, 248, 253  
Gautier, Théophile, 27, 29, 30-35, 37, 38, 181, 213  
Gay, Sophie, 239  
George, Mlle., 7, 24, 115, 175, 181-223  
Giversac, M. d'Hugues de, 103  
Goncourt, Edmund de, 114, 146  
Grandval, 40, 103, 107  
Grange, La, 14, 20  
Gué, Mme. du, 40  
Guttinguer, Ulric, 234, 235, 247  
Harcourt, Lord, 253  
Hardy, Alexandre, 10  
Harel, 209-219  
Harley, M. de, 87  
Haussonville, M. d', 136  
Hébert, 164, 165, 166  
Hugo, Victor, 211, 212, 220  
Janin, Jules, 215  
Jaucourt, M. de, 103, 105  
Josephine, Empress, 270  
Kain, Le, 24, 82, 83, 85, 108, 248, 253  
Kervert, Baron de, 103  
Klinglin, 43, 44  
Königsmarck, Aurora von, 27, 52  
Lafon, 180  
Laguerre, Mlle., 89  
Lamballe, Princess de, 156  
Langellerie, H. de, 78, 79  
Larive, 113-121  
Latouche, H. de, 234, 235, 237, 238, 242, 243, 244  
Lauzun, 262  
Lebrun, Mme., 269  
Leclerc, General, 269  
Lecouvreur, Adrienne, 18, 24, 26, 27, 37-60, 62, 65-69, 94, 95, 101  
Lecszinska, Marie, 35  
Lemaître, Frédérick, 209, 211, 212  
Lemaure, Mlle., 87  
Löben, Comtesse de, 53  
Louis XIV, 9, 22  
Louis XV, 34  
Louis XVI, 156  
Louvét, 160  
Luxembourg, Duc de, 103  
Maintenon, Mme. de, 11, 121  
Marat, 256, 262  
Marguerie, M., 283  
Marie-Antoinette, 155, 156  
Marlborough, Duke of, 99  
Marmontel, 71, 103, 107, 108  
Mars, Mlle., 239  
Massereene, Lord, 82  
Masson, Frédéric, 268  
Maurepas, 87  
Merle, 211  
Mirabeau, 255, 263  
Molé, 83, 84, 91, 252, 253  
Molière, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17, 18, 20, 23, 24  
Moligny, 89  
Monaco, Prince de, 103, 106  
Montansier, Mlle., 24, 148, 150-173, 178  
Montespan, M. de, 82  
Morissot, 90  
Napoleon Bonaparte, 170-174, 191, 194-199, 207, 215, 249, 267, 284

# INDEX

- Napoleon III, 262  
 Nehra, Mme., 262  
 Neuville, 156, 157, 162, 165-167,  
 170, 173  
  
 Oraison, Comte de, 104  
 Orléans, Duc d', 26, 159  
  
 Pantalon, 90  
 Parc, Mlle. du, 19  
 Pauline, Mme., 266-282, 285  
 Pellegrin, Abbé, 87  
 Périgord, 61  
 Pompadour, Mme. de, 109  
 Popelinière, M. de la, 103  
  
 Quinault-Dufresne, 29  
  
 Rachel, 38, 39, 220  
 Racine, 11, 15, 18, 19, 25, 26  
 Raucourt, Mlle., 115, 174-182  
 Rebours, 90  
 Richelieu, M. de, 150  
 Rieux, Président de, 103  
 Rintau, Marie, 71  
 Riouffe, 262, 263  
 Rivière, Mlle., 160  
 Robespierre, 161, 164, 166, 167  
 Rochecouart, Marquis de, 104  
 Rochefort, M., 221  
 Rohan, Chevalier de, 45  
 Roland, Mme., 166, 262, 263  
 Ryer, Du, 10  
  
 Sainte-Beuve, 234, 243, 244  
 Saint-Contest, M. de, 153, 154,  
 155  
 Saint-Huberty, Mme., 86, 87,  
 262, 264  
 Saint-Just, 160  
 Saint-Prix, 254, 255  
 Sainval, Mlle., 160  
 Sand, George, 27  
 Sapieha, Prince, 184, 188, 189,  
 192, 195, 196  
  
 Saulnier, 90  
 Saxe, Maurice de, 18, 24, 26, 27,  
 38, 39, 40, 51-70, 75-78  
 Scanapiecq, Mother, 96  
 Ségur, Vicomte de, 258, 259  
 Sevigné, Mme. de, 25  
 Sophie, Mlle., 272  
 Soubise, Prince de, 103  
 Staël, Mme. de, 24, 111, 135-  
 146, 205  
 Stäel-Holstein, Baron de, 134,  
 145  
 Starenberg, Princess of, 116  
 Strogonof, Count, 204  
 Sussy, Comte de, 283  
  
 Tallien, 160  
 Talma, 24, 160, 248-285  
 Thibouville, Marquis de, 103  
 Tristan, 257  
  
 Valbelle, M. de, 111, 113, 120,  
 121  
 Valmore, 201, 242  
 Vanhove, Mlle., 266  
 Vergniaud, 160, 262, 263  
 Vestris, 91, 92, 254  
 Veuil, Chevalier de, 186, 187  
 Victrix, Venus, 269  
 Vigny, Alfred de, 211  
 Villeguillon, M. de, 103  
 Villeroy, Duchesse de, 85  
 Voisenon, Abbé de, 77  
 Voltaire, 26, 45, 67, 68, 82, 92,  
 109  
  
 Weimer-Verteuil, Mme., 177,  
 179, 180, 210  
 Wurtemberg, Marechal de, 28,  
 29  
 Wurtemberg, Princess de, 204  
  
 Ximenès, Marquis de, 103, 105











